

PATTON'S WAR

AN AMERICAN GENERAL'S COMBAT LEADERSHIP

VOLUME 1

November 1942–July 1944

KEVIN M. HYMEL



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Jacket image: Patton examines Fedala beach. He wrote his wife that he thought this
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*To my Mom and Pop, Alice “Winkie” and Gary Hymel,
without whom this book never would have been written.
My Mom didn’t live to see this book, but she was my biggest fan.*

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Preface

THERE ARE TWO General George S. Pattons. 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, easily found in published books, archived documents, and films, including the Academy Award-winning Hollywood blockbuster *Patton*; the second Patton is much harder to find. This one shows up in a few paragraphs scattered among thousands of veterans' and reporters' memoirs, oral history collections, and veterans' surveys.

When I wrote my first book on Patton, *Patton's Photographs: War as He Saw It* (2006), I had considered myself lucky to find a niche of Patton's life that had not yet been explored. Specifically, I had discovered his photo albums, packed with pictures the camera-toting general personally took as well as with, in some cases, his commentary—documents that no other author had used. Still, I could not help but ask if there was anywhere to go from there. Patton's life had already been recorded in great detail by a number of fine historians, including most prominently Martin Blumenson, Carlo D'Este, and Stanley Hirshon. Other authors had already traced his family tree, researching and writing about his wife and children. Was there more left to uncover?

Although my first book is a collection of Patton's photography, in talking to veterans and other historians in the course of my research, I realized there was much more to add about the general outside of the context of a man and his camera. Having focused my research, I found myself accumulating a pile of never-before-revealed stories. This book is a result of that work.

Yet as I embarked on this book, I still had a fundamental decision to make: should I just list the new information in a short treatise, or should I take up the far greater challenge and present the general's combat experiences from day one of World War II to the last day of battle? In order to do the latter, I needed to contextualize the new revelations I had compiled in order to better understand Patton's thinking and actions during the momentous conflict. This led me to examine all of Patton's diaries and letters at the Library of Congress. While Martin Blumenson's *The Patton Papers* is considered the Bible for anyone wishing to form an understanding of the iconic American general, space limitations forced Blumenson to edit out a portion of Patton's WWII material. But I wanted it all. I also studied the works of the people surrounding Patton during the fighting—staffers, corps commanders, and division commanders. If, for example, Patton wrote his wife that he was feeling sick, or even just blue, I wanted to know what affected him. Again, I wanted the whole story. The result is a thorough examination of Patton's growth in some areas and his deterioration in others during the zenith of his military career.

This book originated in a comment made by my friend John McManus, professor of military history at the University of Missouri of Science and Technology and the editor of the University of Missouri Press's series *The American Military Experience*. John pressed me to find a new perspective on Patton. Upon reflection, I decided to focus exclusively on Patton's experiences in World War II. My hope was that in doing so I could illuminate his actions, eradicate a few myths, and possibly discover some of his motivations. I also had access to information that had not been available to either Blumenson or D'Este: published memoirs and letters from WWII veterans who served under Patton; firsthand accounts of meetings with Patton that found their way into museums and library special collections; and newly created digital maps, all of which helped put his exploits into sharper focus. By combining well-known sources with this new vein of information, I hope to present a more thorough examination of one of the United States' best-known military leaders.

Every soldier who met Patton remembered the moment distinctly. In each case it was a high point, or at least a memorable experience. For many, it became a badge of honor to be chewed out by him, and for some even to be accosted by him. Not only was Patton already famous by the time he arrived on the coast of Morocco, where this story begins, but both his ire and occasional manifestations of humor in these encounters

left distinct marks worth remembering. Most important, each encounter with a soldier presented yet another example of Patton's frontline presence.

This first volume of *Patton's War* focuses on the general's life from November 8, 1942, when he landed on the shore of Fedala beach in Morocco, until July 31, 1944, the day before his Third Army went to war on the European continent. Both this volume, appearing in the American Military Experience series, and its sequels analyze Patton's leadership on the battlefield and his actions between campaigns. The book is written for both the serious student and the casual reader. Because I did not set out to write anything like a full biography, I only address Patton's previous education and experience when they affected his battlefield decision making.

While I have been to almost all of Patton's WWII battlefields, from Morocco and Sicily to England and the continent of Europe, and have poured through some twenty-five hundred soldiers' memoirs in the Library of Congress and other repositories around the United States and England, I am confident I did not find every story about him. Logistical challenges, complicated further by the coronavirus pandemic, got in the way of some of my research. Nevertheless, I have endeavored to present a much more layered portrait of one of America's iconic generals than previously existed.

All opinions and interpretations expressed in this book are mine alone and all errors, both of omission and commission, are my responsibility.

Kevin M. Hymel
Arlington, VA

PATTON'S WAR

Introduction

ONE OF THE best stories this historian ever heard about General George S. Patton Jr.'s generalship did not qualify for the subsequent chapters of this book—but I will tell it here. An American soldier sat alone in a foxhole, exhausted and disheveled, in the Tunisian desert. He hadn't eaten or bathed in days. Then, behind him, a U.S. Army command car rolled up and out popped Patton, impeccably dressed in his battle uniform. The general marched up to the soldier and berated him for his appearance, calling him a disgrace. As Patton turned and walked away, the soldier raised his rifle and took aim at his back. Thinking better of it, he lowered the rifle. It took twenty years for the soldier, by then a civilian, to realize that Patton had done the right thing. Before his brief but enraging encounter with the general, the soldier said, he would have readily surrendered to the first German soldier who showed up. But Patton left him angry, so angry that he was more than ready to kill anyone who dared to approach his foxhole.

The curator of France's Brittany American Cemetery related this story to me in 2005. He had met the veteran years before at the North African American Cemetery in Carthage, Tunisia. Unfortunately, the story was not documented and so cannot be verified, but it exemplifies Patton's leadership, highlighting his use of aggressiveness and brusqueness to get his soldiers to fight. This scenario would be repeated across the battlefields of North Africa, Sicily, England, and the European continent. Patton's was a unique style of leadership, one which got results but sometimes bordered on the tyrannical. It was his leadership and temper that Patton worked hard—though not always successfully—to balance.

This book examines Patton's leadership as a general during World War II. The U.S. Army defines a leader as someone who serves as a role model

through strong intellect, physical presence, professional competence, and moral character. In addition, a leader is someone willing and able to act decisively, within a superior leader's intent and purpose, in the Army's best interest, as well as being someone who recognizes that organizations (not individuals) accomplish the mission.¹ Throughout the war, Patton strove to live up to this ideal. At times he surpassed it, at other times he fell woefully short.

While Patton had fought before—in Mexico as a lieutenant in the cavalry and in World War I as a lieutenant colonel in the tank corps—in World War II, from the first day of battle to the last, he fought as a general. The stars on his shoulders, collar, and helmet meant that he now controlled and coordinated different branches of the service—the infantry, armor, and the artillery, as well as engineers, doctors, and the military police—and in Patton's case, the U.S. Navy and Army Air Forces. Patton the general understood how each separate entity functioned alone and with one another—the mark of a generalist. He spent the war perfecting his style of generalship, rising through the ranks from a two-star to a four-star general by the time the guns fell silent.²

An emotional man, he was prone to a short temper that could explode at any time. He could equally be brought to tears, usually in front of battlefield wounded. At times, the temper and tears manifested together. He could be abrupt to the point of driving people away and suffered bouts of depression. He also enthralled people with his knowledge of poetry and history. One of the keys to Patton's leadership was his love of reading history, especially military history. All his life, and throughout World War II, he consumed volumes of history, always learning through examples of victory and defeat. An extrovert, he relished public speaking, motivating and teaching soldiers how to attack, adapt, and win on the battlefield.

From the training camps of the United States to battlefields across the Atlantic, there was no mistaking George S. Patton or his effect on those he commanded. When he entered a room or stepped onto the battlefield, the men around him changed. Salutes became sharp and spines stiff. He brought a sense of urgency wherever he went, and that energy brought results. Whether the men around him feared him, loved him, or hated him, the effect was the same: action.

Throughout World War II, Patton fought bravely and brilliantly. He took calculated risks and could often be found near the front, where the bullets flew and the artillery exploded. He stood as a warrior example to his men in the field, encouraging those he commanded, although

sometimes resorting to irrational verbal abuse and inflicting corporal punishment upon those who did not live up to his standards. His personal judgements also, at times, lapsed.

In Morocco Patton pushed landing craft back into the water, ordered his men to return fire at strafing enemy aircraft, and helped retrieve dead bodies from the sea. He also fired his sidearm when needed. The Vichy French surrendered to him before he could prove his mettle at the gates of Casablanca. In Tunisia, he resuscitated a defeated corps through discipline (that at time seemed excessive) and improved conditions. He pushed and prodded his divisions forward, on occasion personally leading them through minefields. He constantly exposed himself to enemy fire. He also fired ineffective commanders and supported those who fought well.

In Sicily, he personally helped repel an enemy armored attack that threatened to throw his troops back into the sea. When denied roads by British general Bernard Law Montgomery, and any meaningful objective by British general Harold Alexander, Patton created his own extra corps and sent it north to Palermo, effectively cutting the island in half. He followed up that victory by hopscotching along Sicily's north coast to beat Montgomery to Messina, Montgomery's objective for the entire campaign. During this operation, Patton's decision to remove the 1st Infantry Division commander and deputy commander—Terry Allen and Teddy Roosevelt Jr.—proved incredibly unpopular, but his reasons for doing so were sound. Oddly enough, Patton's corps commander, Omar Bradley, took credit for the removal, calling it a relief.

Patton made mistakes, some of them horrible. In Tunisia, he possibly caused, and covered up, the death of his aide, Captain Richard Jenson. He also killed a Sicilian civilian who blocked his route on a mountain road. Patton's draconian discipline angered his subordinates and sometimes turned soldiers against him. His penchant for berating soldiers and delivering corporal punishment culminated in episodes at two different hospital tents in Sicily, in which Patton slapped soldiers suffering from what we now recognize as post-traumatic stress disorder. Both incidents had far-reaching effects, as Patton's commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, decided his fate. Patton spent months in semi-exile as Eisenhower weighed his usefulness. But even after Eisenhower decided to keep Patton as an active commander, the latter still had to wait to be called back to the war. In the meantime he busied himself by planning his own army's invasion of the Italian mainland. During that wait, two

more incidents surfaced, involving men under his command who had killed prisoners of war, actions which, they claimed, had been committed under Patton's order. While both cases would eventually be resolved, they haunted Patton.

Finally called back into the war at the start of 1944, Patton arrived in England to take command of Third Army as part of the battle for France and the invasion of Germany. He attended training demonstrations and often interjected when he saw soldiers or tankers committing minor mistakes that could cost lives on the battlefield. He also lectured units, providing them with practical instruction, mixed with stories and anecdotes to improve their fighting spirit, with curses liberally added to get the men's attention. While Patton honed his army, the Allies used his name to trick the Germans into believing he would lead an amphibious assault at the French port of Calais, northeast of Normandy. As part of the deception, he was ordered to keep a low profile while in Britain.

But Patton could not seem to keep himself out of trouble. A speech he gave to a group of British civilians in Knutsford appeared in the local papers. Worse, some accounts had him insulting one of the Allied countries. Patton's exposure to the press enraged Eisenhower while the gaff caused an uproar in the United States. Despite the minor crisis, Eisenhower decided that Patton's value to the war effort outweighed the embarrassments. He kept Patton in command of Third Army, albeit after berating him for his behavior and eliciting a promise to keep quiet.

The invasion of France, D-Day, June 6, 1944, occurred without Patton. Despite his knowledge of the area (he had visited it as a young officer), his experience with both amphibious combat assaults and fighting the Germans on an army level, Patton remained behind while other, less-experienced and less-creative leaders planned and executed the assault. Patton, no doubt, would have done things differently. He waited a month in England before finally flying across the English Channel to Normandy, where he waited another month as enough troops and tanks arrived. Finally, on August 1, 1944, he took the reins of Third Army. Volume 1 of this book ends here.

Throughout the fighting in North Africa and Sicily and in the aftermath of each campaign, Patton constantly frustrated, embarrassed, and impressed Eisenhower. Early in the fighting, Patton respected his superior and his seemingly impossible job as Allied commander. As the campaigns ground across Tunisia and Sicily, however, Patton grew sour on Eisenhower, feeling his commander was more interested in politics

than combat (he was not) and more concerned with holding together an alliance than promoting the U.S. Army (he was). On the personal level, Patton continually worried that Eisenhower would send him home. While most of these fears swelled between campaigns, they remained in the back of Patton's mind as he led combat operations. When Patton felt Eisenhower was ignoring him, or worse, shunning him, he resorted to drinking and sulking. He would also vent to his staff or disparage Eisenhower in his diaries and letters to his wife. He accused Eisenhower of short-sightedness on the battlefield, of cozying up to British allies—if not entirely caving to their ideas—and favoring weak American generals.

Patton's relationship with General Omar Bradley was more complex. Patton was Bradley's superior in North Africa and Sicily, yet Bradley went on to command Patton as an army group commander as Patton prepared Third Army for combat. While Bradley got along well with Patton in North Africa, in Sicily he felt Patton caved to British demands without a fight. By the time Patton arrived in England, Bradley wanted little to do with him. And if Patton's relationship with Bradley was complicated, his relationship with British general Bernard Montgomery was a simple combination of hatred and envy. Although Patton started the war respecting the British officer, by the planning stage of the invasion of Sicily, his distrust of Montgomery had taken root—and would only grow over the next three years. He judged Montgomery to be a pompous, arrogant, and overly cautious general who openly worked against him during most of the Sicilian campaign. Patton could tolerate pompousness, but only if backed up with battlefield success.

The Patton who first stepped onto Moroccan sands on November 8, 1942, was well-educated and experienced at his profession. He had a keen sense of humor and sharp temper, but he also had an energy about him. As a young officer, he had constantly tested his own courage, often sticking his head out on rifle ranges to face his fear. He believed in his own reincarnation and that he had lived all previous lives as a warrior. He wrote poetry about war and combat. He knew how to fly planes. He wore his own special pistols on the battlefield, yet also carried a camera. He steeled himself most of his life to be a perfect warrior, waiting and hoping for the chance to prove it on a large scale.³

Born in California on November 11, 1885, and named after his father, George S. Patton, the young Patton grew up on Bible stories, the classics, and heroic tales of the Confederate Army. His grandfather and uncles—Virginians all—had fought and died for the Confederacy, forcing his

grandmother to leave the blighted state and head west to join her more prosperous family in California. Patton's father had attended the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), like his father before him, but became a lawyer. Young George had one sister, Nita, who never married.⁴

Patton held a strong belief in the social class system, hesitating to socialize with people below his perceived class. "It is too much work with people out of ones [*sic*] own class who are not dressed up," he once wrote his wife.⁵ He grew up in a world where institutional racism and anti-Semitism permeated American society. Jim Crow laws kept blacks from enjoying any kind of equality, while people of the Jewish faith experienced less prejudice—but not by much. Patton's father admitted that blacks were treated poorly but refused to consider reparations because they might "imperil the continued supremacy of our own race, or threaten the pollution of its Aryan blood." Patton's world, including his schools and the U.S. Army, were mostly all white, overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon Protestant, politically conservative, and racially segregated. Patton constantly used the word "nigger" when referring to African Americans, and "Jew" when writing about anyone of the Jewish faith. Paradoxically, during the war, he was close to his aide Sergeant George Meeks, an African American, and Colonel Oscar Koch, a Jewish officer. Patton got along with both men, yet continued to make derogatory comments about both groups. His prejudices would pop up from time to time on the battlefields of the Mediterranean and Europe, tainting his leadership role, as a general is supposed to look past such distinctions.⁶

Patton often displayed traits of his specific leadership style throughout his youth and young adulthood. As a child, he played with toy soldiers and wooden swords and reenacted ancient battles. He started attending a private academy at age eleven, where he experienced reading and writing difficulties—probably the result of dyslexia, an unknown disability at the time. After high school, he attended VMI for a year before transferring to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. While he excelled at VMI, earning good grades and high marks for his military bearing, West Point proved more challenging. He excelled in history and military comportment, but his grades suffered in other classes, forcing him to repeat his first, or "plebe" year. It was at West Point that Patton's fierce temper emerged. Promoted to second corporal, he harassed plebes, angering almost everyone around him in the process. Infractions, however slight, literally made him see red. He admitted that just looking at a plebe

angered him, a rage that could last for days. He graduated in 1909 and went to serve in the U.S. Army's cavalry.⁷

Patton married his childhood sweetheart, Beatrice Ayer, on May 26, 1910. She would be his companion, lover, muse, confidant, and confessor, as well as his greatest cheerleader, for the rest of his life. Born to a rich Boston family, Beatrice accepted George's marriage proposal minutes after their first kiss. She bore him three children: Beatrice, whom they called "Little Bea," Ruth Ellen, and George. Army life kept the couple apart for long periods, and, while World War II kept them separated for three years, he wrote her almost every day.⁸

Patton was also an accomplished athlete, so much so that, three years into his Army career, he participated in the 1912 summer Olympics in Stockholm. He competed in the modern pentathlon, which included a pistol shoot, a three-hundred-meter swim, fencing, a steeple-chase ride, and a two-and-a-half-mile run. In so doing, Patton displayed to the world his strength, skill, determination, and passion for winning. He pushed himself so hard during the swim portion that he had to be drawn from the pool with a boat hook. He did well in the shoot, only missing the target twice. He pushed himself too hard again during the run, holding the lead until he neared the finish line, slowing to a walk and collapsing after crossing it. He finished third in fencing and earned a perfect score in the steeplechase. Overall, he finished fifth out of forty-two athletes.⁹

After the Olympics, Patton learned about a new design for the sword, modeled after the French cavalry sword, and brought it back to the United States. The Army soon adopted it as the M1913 Patton Saber. He traveled to France, where he attended the French cavalry school in Saumur and studied fencing under Europe's champion, Lieutenant Mas de la Tree, whom he had bested in Stockholm. He and Bea visited locations in Cherbourg and Normandy, including Vanes, St. Malo, St. Lo, and Caen, making friends with French officers and improving his French language skills along the way.¹⁰

Determined to take advantage of any opportunity to prove himself a fighter, Patton served on Brigadier General John Pershing's staff during the Army's punitive expedition to hunt down the Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa in 1916. At his own request, Patton was transferred to the cavalry, as part of which he tracked down one of Villa's lieutenants, General Julio Cardenas, at Rubio Ranch. Using automobiles in combat for the first time in American military history, Lieutenant Patton and

a handful of soldiers encircled the ranch and gunned down Cardenas and two other banditos on horseback in a wild shootout. The Americans strapped the corpses to the hoods of their cars and proudly brought them back to Pershing.¹¹

When the United States entered World War I on April 2, 1917, Patton first served as an assistant to General Pershing before leaving for the newest branch of the U.S. Army—the Tank Corps. He established a tank school, created a tank training ground, and wrote the first manual for tank operations. He brought discipline and intelligence to the fledgling unit, and made it one of the most efficient in the Army. So impressive was this young tanker that he also lectured on tank tactics at the French Army General Staff College before he had even led the iron beasts into battle.¹²

He brought that same drive to the battlefield. At the Battle of St.-Mihiel, on September 12, 1918, he followed his tanks on foot and helped dig some out of the mud. He stood in the face of an artillery barrage that forced almost everyone else to the ground and walked over a bridge to prove it was not mined. He climbed onto a tank and led it forward, leaping off when he noticed machine-gun bullets chipping away the paint on the turret. About nine days later, he led his tanks again in the Meuse-Argonne offensive. Again, he followed his tanks into battle and again helped dig them out of the mud. This time, with his tanks out of gas, he led an impromptu infantry attack until a German bullet struck him in the upper thigh. The war ended two months later, on November 11, 1918, his thirty-third birthday. As a result of his battlefield actions, the name Patton would forever be associated with tanks.¹³

The conclusion of World War I meant the end of combat exhilaration for Patton. Worse yet, he now found himself in a shrinking peacetime army. When it cut its armor budget in 1920, he returned to the cavalry. He attended the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, served in Massachusetts and Washington, D.C., and spent two tours in Hawaii.¹⁴

The first tour of Hawai'i, from 1925 to 1928, began well. Patton served as both the head of intelligence and personnel, earning a promotion to head of war plans and training. However, his abrasive nature, impatience with others' mistakes, including the brash denunciation of his superiors' errors, cost him his job. Transferred to the Chief of Cavalry Office at Fort Myer near Washington, D.C., he served as executive officer. When Depression-era WWI veterans who wanted their promised pay bonus

sooner rather than later—the Bonus Army—converged on Washington and were eventually ordered out of the capital, Patton, on horseback, scouted ahead for the cavalry, then joined the main force in driving the bedraggled and shocked marchers back across the Anacostia River.¹⁵

Transferred again to Hawai'i, this time from 1935 to 1937, Patton felt his usefulness to the Army had come to an end. He grew bored with his intelligence duties, drank too often, and cursed too much. His aimlessness led him to an affair with his wife's niece, twenty-one-year-old Jean Gordon (he was forty-two at the time), for which he later apologized. When his Hawai'ian tour ended in 1937, he sailed the family back to the United States in his own yacht.¹⁶

Patton returned to a world unraveling. The Japanese had invaded China and Spain was fighting a civil war, mostly with weapons from Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Italy, which had invaded Ethiopia the year before, entered into a supportive pact with both Germany and Japan. Just as the world around him was becoming interesting, Patton's army career almost ended. A horse kicked him, double fracturing his leg. It took him six months to recover, all the while bed ridden. While working himself back to health, he taught cavalry tactics to the soldiers of the 9th Cavalry Regiment at Fort Riley, Kansas.¹⁷

Promoted to colonel, Patton commanded the 5th Cavalry Regiment at Fort Clark, Texas, for only four months, before being called to Washington to take command of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment at Fort Myer on December 10, 1938. He found the assignment disappointing, even though it led to a close relationship with the Army's new chief of staff, General George C. Marshall. While Patton was at Fort Myer, on September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. For the next two years, Patton's star would rise as the war crept closer to the United States. Olympic athlete, motorized and armored warfare pioneer, cavalry officer, pilot, sailor, tanker, war hero—Patton could point to an exciting and diverse career that seemed to align him perfectly for the challenges ahead.¹⁸

This is the man who stepped onto the sand of Fedala beach in Morocco on November 8, 1942, and would go on to spend the next thirty months spearheading the destruction of the Axis Powers, until he stood in Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, on May 7, 1945, and learned the war in Europe was over. While Patton led a unique life of military opportunity, his exploits in World War II specifically made him an icon of American history, military study, and even international pop culture. The accumulation of Patton's experience, hard work, and unique personality paid off on the battlefields

of North Africa, Sicily, and the European continent. Everything he had strived for in his life seemed to benefit him and his soldiers during the war. It was as if the path of George Patton's life intersected with world events when the world most needed someone like him.

As much as World War II saw the culmination of his career, so too did it symbolize the global ascendancy of the United States military, which had long been in the shadow of Europe's professional armies. This was no coincidence. Patton's accomplishments helped make the United States a superpower. While Patton did not live to see it, so too would his exploits grow to legendary status. His image will forever be associated with World War II—Patton's War.

PART I

North African Corps Commander

CHAPTER ONE

First Day of Battle

MAJOR GENERAL GEORGE S. Patton Jr. unholstered his ivory-handled Smith and Wesson .357 Magnum revolver, aimed, and fired. The bullet whizzed past the head of his intended target. He missed, but he achieved his goal just the same. His target, a local Moroccan man picking up an American rifle on Fedala beach, got the message, dropping the rifle and darting off. American soldiers nearby popped their heads above their sandy foxholes to investigate what had disturbed the relative quiet. Patton had announced his presence on the battlefield his way, with his first shot fired in World War II.¹

Sunday, November 8, 1942, was a long day for Patton. It started at 2:00 a.m. when he awoke, fully clothed in khaki trousers, shirt, and tie, in the captain's cabin aboard the USS *Augusta*, the flagship of the American Western Task Force. After only five hours of sleep, he got out of bed and put on a pair of regular Army buckle boots instead of his flashier cavalry ones. He tucked his pants into his boots and pulled on a simple button-up infantryman's jacket with the triangular I Armored Corps patch on the breast, identifying his command prior to taking on the mantle of the Western Task Force. He hung a pair of binoculars around his neck, a camera case over one shoulder, and donned his war helmet. He chose not to strap on his two ivory-handled pistols, instead having them packed on a landing craft that would take him to shore. The double-starred rank of a major general gleamed from his helmet, his collar, and shoulders. There would be no mistaking him on the battlefield.²

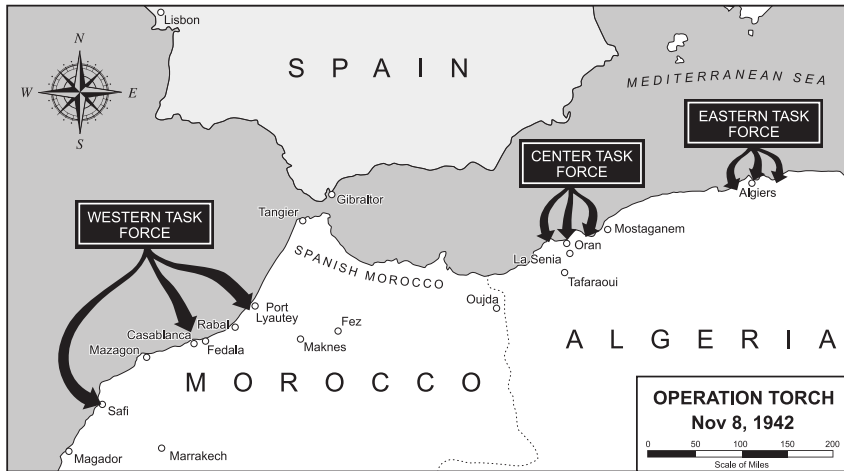
The face that greeted Patton in the mirror reflected almost fifty-seven years of adventurous living. His silver-white hair had receded to his temples, but a few strands still graced his crown. Crow's feet spread from the corners of his eyes, and skin hung slightly from his jowls on

either side of thin lips. His teeth were stained brown from a lifetime of smoking cigarettes, cigars, and pipes. Despite an outdoor life of horseback riding, sailing, and soldiering, a small paunch had developed in his midsection. He explained his weight gain in 1945 thus: "My weight is due to more brains." Scars from horse-riding accidents, competitive sports, and bullets speckled his body, but his uniform provided ample cover.³ Dressed for battle and fully awake, he went on deck to see the lights of the Moroccan city of Fedala. The sea, predicted to be pitching and turbulent, lay perfectly still, a dead calm. "God is with us," he thought.⁴

Patton stood at the tip of the spear of thirty-five thousand men ready to storm three Moroccan beaches. His Western Task Force comprised 106 large naval vessels and numerous small landing craft. He commanded soldiers from the 3rd Infantry Division and elements of the 9th Infantry Division. He had 252 tanks from both the 70th Tank Battalion and the 2nd Armored Division. His air force claimed 229 Navy and Army aircraft. Naval guns would handle any sustained heavy fire beyond his soldiers' reach. The task force was split into three groups: the Northern Attack Group, consisting of the 9th Infantry Division's 60th Combat Team under Brigadier General Lucian Truscott attacking Mehdiya and Port Lyautey; the Center Attack Group, consisting of the 3rd Infantry Division, under Major General Jonathan W. Anderson, taking Fedala, sixteen miles north of Casablanca; and the Southern Attack Group, consisting of the 2nd Armored Division and the 9th Infantry's 47th Combat Team under Major General Earnest (Ernie) Harmon, attacking the port of Safi, 150 miles south of Casablanca. Patton would go ashore with Anderson's troops.⁵

Patton's attack was just one part of Operation TORCH, which brought western Allied forces onto North African shores in three separate amphibious assaults. Two task forces of combined American and British troops departed from England to simultaneously attack the cities of Algiers and Oran, both in Algeria. Only Patton's all-American Western Task Force journeyed across the Atlantic Ocean for Morocco's shores. TORCH was the United States' first offensive in the war against the Axis powers and came almost a year after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. However, the Allies would not be fighting the Germans or Italians during TORCH. Instead, they faced the Vichy French.

As Patton waited to begin his first attack of the war, Europe had been ablaze for the last four years. Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland on



Map 1. Operation TORCH, November 8, 1942

September 1, 1939, signaled the official opening of World War II. The Soviet Union's Joseph Stalin soon joined him in dividing up Poland. Stalin next invaded Finland while Hitler attacked Norway, ejecting British and French forces. Then, on May 10, 1940, Hitler attacked France and the bordering Low Countries, driving the Allies west. British prime minister Winston Churchill saved a portion of his army from the beaches of Dunkirk, but Great Britain stood alone until the next year, when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. While war raged in Eastern Europe, the western Allies fought the Germans in the seas and skies and faraway battlefields. German forces invaded Yugoslavia and Greece. They also dropped paratroopers onto Crete. In North Africa fighting seesawed across the Egyptian and Libyan deserts after the British defeated an attacking Italian force. To contain the British gains, the Germans sent a corps commanded by General Erwin Rommel to help their whipped partner.⁶

Rommel soon went on the offensive and drove the British back to Egypt. Attacks and counterattacks raged across the desert, with Rommel constantly fooling or overwhelming the British. A worried Churchill continued to replace his desert commanders until he landed on General Bernard Law Montgomery, who restored morale and, after an intense battle at El Alamein, overwhelmed and drove Rommel west in early November 1942. Operation TORCH was meant to help Montgomery by getting men and arms behind Rommel, shutting off his retreat to Tunisia,

surrounding him, and eventually destroying his army. This was the world that Patton entered the morning of November 8.

Patton's mission was almost the operation that wasn't. During the TORCH planning sessions in Washington, D.C., in which Patton took part, the British protested that his assault on Morocco was unnecessary. They argued that the port at Casablanca was too distant—thirteen hundred miles—from the Tunisian battlefield where the British hoped to fight the Axis. They also contended that the Atlas Mountains made travel between the two locations difficult. But the Americans wanted possession of Africa's closest port to the United States and argued vehemently for the operation. After one particularly heated debate, an infuriated Patton stormed home, picked up a foot-tall Hawai'ian war statue, marched out to the backyard, and threw it into the pond. The statue, nicknamed "Charlie," had been a good-luck gift from Patton's wife. But with the Moroccan landings stymied by politics, Patton felt the war gods had turned on him and took his wrath out on Charlie. Still, the British eventually bent to the Americans' desire to attack Morocco and Patton's Western Task Force set sail for North Africa.⁷

Patton spent the fifteen-day voyage to Morocco exercising, attending religious services, and shooting an M1 carbine rifle off the ship's fantail. He exercised by walking around the ship, using a rowing machine, or holding onto his dresser and running in place; by his calculations, 480 steps equaled a quarter mile. He took pictures of his staff and enjoyed the *Augusta's* amenities: a private bathtub in his room and well-prepared meals: "I have to watch eating too much," he confessed. Everywhere he went on the ship a Marine guard shadowed him, to Patton's irritation. He filled his daily lulls by writing letters and diary entries and reading books, including the Koran. Emotionally, he oscillated between worrying about the coming battle and trusting in fate.⁸

As the task force neared the North African shore, Patton's war speech played over each ship's public address system. "Soldiers and sailors," his voice barked, "We are to be congratulated because we have been chosen as the units of the United States Army best trained to take part in this great American effort." In a booming, though high-pitched tone, Patton explained the operation's objectives, described the enemy, and offered encouragement: "When the great day of battle comes, remember your training, and remember above all that speed and vigor of attack are the sure roads to success, and you must succeed—for to retreat is as cowardly

as it is fatal. Indeed, once landed, retreat is impossible. Americans do not surrender.” He stressed that a pint of sweat saved a gallon of blood and concluded, “On our victory depends the freedom or slavery of the human race. We shall surely win.”⁹ The men were issued the password of the day to prevent friendly fire incidents once ashore. To the challenge “George,” a soldier would answer, “Patton.”¹⁰

Patton steeled himself for whatever lay ahead. “My whole life has been pointed at this moment,” he wrote his wife. “All I want to do right now is my full duty. If I do that, the rest will take care of itself.” To a friend he wrote, “We shall be completely successful.” But a small quiver of doubt was palpable: “If we are not, it is not my intention to live to make excuses; however, I feel very healthy for a dead man.”¹¹ Patton had done everything possible to ensure success, from training his troops to requesting all needed equipment, in only a few months’ time. Only hours before the landings were to take place, he spotted an imperfection that he felt might hinder the operation. Shown a French-language pamphlet intended to be dropped by the thousands over Moroccan cities, he noticed it lacked accents on certain French words. He quickly gathered his staff and ordered them to add the accents. “Or do you expect me to land on French soil introduced by such illiterate calling cards—Goddam it?”¹²

If the poorly worded pamphlet irritated Patton, a message from the president infuriated him. As the fleet arrived off Morocco well before sunrise on November 8, a BBC broadcast from Franklin D. Roosevelt to all of North Africa asked the Vichy regime not to obstruct the assaulting forces. The broadcast had been timed to coordinate with the assaults on Oran and Algiers, which took place hours earlier than Patton’s landing. Patton worried that the broadcast blew his cover before a single landing craft had headed to shore.¹³

Somewhere in the darkness, Patton’s troops clambered down rope nets into those landing craft. Some overloaded soldiers fell into the water, never to reemerge. H-hour, the time for the assault, approached—4:00 a.m.—and passed without action. The Navy kept delaying as coxswains struggled to get their landing craft into formation for the push toward the shore. Patton anxiously watched the transports line up, visible only by their colored lights. Over the radio, he heard the naval commanders speaking in code, organizing the fleet: “All my chickens are here, am holding them.” Then an American submarine cruised up and guided in the destroyers. All was quiet.¹⁴

The Navy had delivered Patton's force to the battlefield on time and in the right spot, despite his doubts. A month before, he had predicted that the Navy would break down in the first five minutes and the Army would have to provide the victory. "Never in history," he had told his Navy comrades, "has the Navy landed an army at the planned time and place. If you land us anywhere within fifty miles of Fedhala [*sic*] and within one week of D-day, I'll go ahead and win." When poor weather threatened his landing, he radioed Eisenhower that if he could not land on the west coast of Africa, he would land somewhere else, even neutral Spain. But the weather held, and the Navy had done its job. Now it was Patton's turn.¹⁵

The general gathered a group of Army officers together for one last pep talk. "All I can promise you is that we will attack for sixty hours, after that, we will attack for sixty hours more." He told them if the French fought back, they would do so at their own peril. If they chose not to, his men should kiss them on their cheeks and move on. He explained that soldiers could walk faster forward than backward, alluding to his disdain of retreat. "Gentlemen," he concluded, "the weather is delightful and so are our prospects. Prepare at once for action."¹⁶

The speech revealed the single question that dogged Patton, as it did all the men in landing crafts and every commander as far away as the War Department in Washington: Would the Vichy French fight? Would there be an exchange of wine and chocolate bars on the beaches or of hot lead? The French held no love for the Germans, but since France's surrender to Germany in 1940 they were subject to German orders. In exchange for Hitler giving the French a portion of their own country to police—Vichy France, which included French territories like Morocco—the Vichy regime swore to defend their country from Germany's enemies. The Americans hoped the French would join them in the fight against the Axis, but as the soldiers and sailors headed ashore, no one, not even Patton, knew what would happen once the boats touched sand.

The radio crackled and Patton heard from General Harmon at Safi: "Batter up." Bad news: his troops were under fire. An hour later Patton eyed a single searchlight on shore shoot into the sky—the prearranged signal for no opposition—then turn to the beach. The sun rose as the destroyers opened fire, providing covering fire for the men spilling out of their landing craft. To Patton, their tracer fire looked like fireflies. Four French ships steamed in to challenge the U.S. Navy, commencing

a duel. General Lucien Truscott radioed in: “Play ball.” He needed naval firepower to knock out a coastal battery on Mehdia beach. Patton’s watch showed 7:13 a.m.¹⁷

Patton prepared himself to go ashore at for 8:00 a.m., but his favorite pistols were missing, waiting for him on his landing craft, which had just been swung out over the water by two davits. Not wanting to wait until he was bobbing toward the African shore to strap on his weapons, Patton ordered Staff Sergeant George Meeks, his African American orderly, to retrieve the pistols. He had purchased his .45 caliber automatic Colt “Peacemaker” in 1916, just before departing for Mexico to take part in General John J. Pershing’s hunt for Pancho Villa. Patton had an eagle carved into one of the ivory grips. After a shootout at Rubio Ranch in which Patton helped kill one of Villa’s commanders, Julio Cardenas, and two of his men, he cut two notches into the grip, denoting the two bandits he helped kill. Patton kept an empty shell in the chamber under the hammer after accidentally wounding himself when a holstered Colt discharged as he stomped his feet, searing his thigh. He wanted a second pistol after having to reload his Peacemaker in the middle of the Rubio Ranch shootout, purchasing the Magnum, which he called his “killing gun,” in late 1935. Patton wore the pistols, both with ivory grips and his initials carved onto them, on a belt that included a compass in a handcuff case and an extra cartridge in a rectangular case.¹⁸

As soon as Meeks brought Patton the holstered pistols, three French warships appeared, driving hard for the fleet. The *Augusta* accelerated and opened fire with its rear gun. The subsequent blast bent Patton’s empty landing craft in half, and it had to be dropped overboard.¹⁹ Patton lost all his personal items except his pistols. Barely batting an eye, he remarked to his bodyguard, “Such are the fortunes of war. . . . Let’s go to the beach!”²⁰ But he wasn’t going anywhere.

For the next three-and-a-half hours the French and American fleets exchanged fire. Geysers erupted on either side of the *Augusta*. One, containing a French yellow dye marker, drenched Patton as he leaned over the side. He witnessed an even closer near miss while on the bridge, but this geyser could not reach him atop his high perch. He considered naval warfare impersonal. Gone were the days of cutlass-wielding sailors clashing between wooden sailing ships. When the French fleet retreated around 11:30, Patton and some officers sat down for lunch. “Naval war is nice and comfortable,” he remarked. Lunch complete, Patton prepared



Figure 1. Patton enjoys a laugh with Rear Admiral Kent Hewitt, the officer in charge of the naval portion of TORCH. Hewitt originally wanted Patton fired, but they eventually resolved their differences and worked well together. Hewitt amazed Patton by arriving off Fedala beach on time. Catalog number: 80-G AFA 56, National Archives and Records Administration.

to go ashore when he got another message from Harmon: his force had captured a battalion of the French Foreign Legion infantry, three tanks, and a large cache of guns. Patton was pleased.²¹

Six members of Patton's staff joined him on the landing craft: his chief of staff, Hobart Gay; his amphibious force commander, Colonel E. Johnson; his aides, Colonel L. Ely, Captain Richard Jensen, and Lieutenant Al Stiller; and his orderly, Staff Sergeant Meeks. Admiral H. Kent Hewitt, the Western Task Force's naval commander was also on board, wearing his helmet backward. Most of the men accompanying Patton would be with him for the rest of the war. Hobart Gay, nicknamed "Hap" for always being happy, excelled at horsemanship and spent most of his career in the cavalry. He was also an expert logistician who served with Patton in the 2nd Armored Division and the I Armored Corps. He had lost an eye in the 1920s, but, as another staffer commented, "He saw more with his one

good eye than most people saw with their two.” Along with his assigned duties as chief of staff, Gay was also Patton’s closest confidant.²²

Twenty-six-year-old Richard “Dick” Jensen also served with Patton in the 2nd Armored Division. Jensen’s father had been a naval commander, and the Jensen and Patton families had been close back in California. Patton treated the young, bespectacled captain like a son and wrote Jensen’s parents constant updates.²³ Texan Al Stiller had served as a tankerman with Patton in World War I. As a “retread”—the term for a war veteran who returned to the service, often filling staff positions to free younger men for combat—he began World War II as a lieutenant and Patton’s unofficial bodyguard. An expert marksman, rumored to be a better shot than even Patton, Stiller would accompany his commander to almost every battlefield.²⁴

Staff Sergeant Meeks had served as Patton’s orderly for five years. Quiet and unobtrusive, he ensured that Patton’s uniforms were immaculate. Despite serving in World War I (where he claimed to have “seen Patton a lot”) and the 1919 American intervention in the Russian Civil War, Meeks had remained a private until 1937, when he began working for Patton at Fort Riley, Kansas, cooking meals for the 10th Cavalry Regiment—the famed Buffalo Soldiers. Meeks could neither read nor write and shaved his head, as he said, “so that the gray wool wouldn’t show.” He developed a reputation as the only man who could give Patton orders. When asked by reporters about this, the sergeant replied, “Sure he takes it from me, I just tell him to sit down and be quiet for a while.”²⁵

If Patton’s staff wanted to serve with him and admired his leadership, the same could not be said for Admiral Hewitt. Still, even though the naval commander tried to have Patton replaced soon after their first meeting, Hewitt would eventually grow to appreciate the foul-mouthed general and work well with him. A graduate of the Naval Academy, Hewitt had served with the Great White Fleet that circumnavigated the globe in 1907 and commanded a destroyer in World War I. At the beginning of World War II, he commanded the Atlantic Fleet Task Groups before taking command of the Amphibious Force, Atlantic Fleet, which became the Western Task Force.²⁶

As the small craft pulled away, a cheer went up from the sailors aboard the *Augusta*. Patton took off his helmet and held it out so they could all see his bright smile. He was finally off to war. After a brief trip inland, the landing craft approached the crescent-shaped shore and Patton and



Figure 2. Patton bids farewell before heading to Fedala beach, north of Casablanca. Behind him is Admiral Hewitt (with helmet on backward). Patton's African American orderly, Sergeant George Meeks, holds up a Thompson machinegun, while Brigadier General Hap Gay does the same in the upper right corner. The captain (with the two bars of his rank showing on his helmet) is probably Richard "Dick" Jensen. Catalog number: 80-G-30122, National Archives and Records Administration.

crew jumped out, splashing into the thigh-high water. Patton waded over to a landing craft stuck on a sandbar. "Come back here!" he roared to a line of soldiers carrying ammunition from the flailing craft. "Yes, I mean all of you. *All of you*. Drop that stuff and come back here." The men began dropping their loads on the sand and returned. Patton, knowing how few landing craft the Navy had, ordered the men to assist him in pushing the craft off the sandbar. They waited for a wave to raise the craft slightly, then heaved as the craft's propeller chopped the water, refloated, and slowly backed away. Patton berated the men again: "Don't you realize that boat has other trips to make?" The men were stunned to see a general doing their work. "How do you expect to fight a war without ammunition?" he asked them, before ordering them to hurry their equipment to a depot.²⁷

Patton strode up the beach only to see that the war had moved inland. American equipment littered the sand while rear echelon soldiers milled about with little sense of urgency. Major Robert Henriques, Patton's British liaison officer, approached and handed Patton his Hawai'ian war statue—Charlie. Patton did not even notice it: "Goddammit, Robert, didn't I tell you to stay on your goddamn ship?" Henriques held up the statue: "Mrs. Patton made me promise to bring Charlie ashore with the assault." Beatrice, ever the thoughtful wife, had dutifully fished Charlie out of the pond back home and entrusted it to Henriques to bring her husband luck during the assault. "So she did," the general quipped.



Figure 3. British major Robert Henriques poses with "Charlie," Patton's war god lava statue, which he presented to Patton on Fedala beach. Catalog number: 111-SC 51976, National Archives and Records Administration.

As Patton surveyed his surroundings, he noted listless GIs standing or sitting around, smoking, talking, and arguing. Some had even stopped digging foxholes. A lone Arab wandered the beach with his donkey, picking up discarded equipment and storing it in sacks on the braying animal's back. "Jesus, I wish I were a corporal!" Patton said to Henriques.

When a naval officer walked by, Patton insisted they have their picture taken together, to prove he was coordinating with the Navy. As they spoke, Patton eyed the Arab picking up a discarded rifle and sticking it into one of the donkey's sacks. That's when Patton unholstered his pistol and fired. The man dropped the rifle and scurried off, while the troops popped their heads out of their shallow foxholes.²⁸

Patton walked up to a small bathing cabana overlooking the beach where a field telephone had been rigged. Here he made his first combat decision of the war, ordering the incoming boats to stop landing on the rough beach and start docking at Fedala's harbor. As he received reports, a French Dewoitine fighter plane peeled out of the sky and headed for the beach, guns blazing. Some men returned fire while others dropped prone on the beach. Patton dashed over to the men. "On your feet!" he stormed. "What the hell's the matter with you men anyways? What do you think you've got guns for?" The men looked up sheepishly at their commander. "You heard me; you've got guns. Use them." As he marched back to the cabana, he concluded his diatribe: "If I see another American soldier lying down on this beach, I'll court-martial him!" Above, the fighter banked and headed down the beach again, this time higher. A staccato of fire met it—this time, everyone stayed on their feet. The plane turned away and wagged its wings. "Should have come in sooner," Patton lamented.²⁹

As the day progressed, General Anderson, the 3rd Infantry Division commander, delivered a French army colonel who told Patton that the French did not want to fight and that he should send a surrender demand to the commanders in Casablanca. Patton sent Gay and Lieutenant Colonel William Wilbur to see the French naval commander, Admiral François Michelier. As the two Americans headed off to Casablanca, Anderson updated Patton on the day's progress. Shore batteries and anti-aircraft guns had caused the most damage, but overall resistance had been light. The Americans had crossed two rivers and taken the high ground before noon. They also captured the last gun by 2:30 p.m., along with at least one hundred French sailors and eight German soldiers. The Germans admitted to not hearing about the Allied landings until 6:00 a.m. "So it was a complete surprise," Patton later cheered in his diary, adding "Anderson is good but lacks drive—however, he did well."³⁰

Patton spent the rest of the day inspecting Fedala and its port. French sailors and soldiers saluted him, but not the French marines. As the sun went down, he dined on fish and cheese in the partially damaged Hotel



Figure 4. Smashed landing craft and equipment litter Fedala beach where Patton came ashore on November 8, 1942, beginning his war. Catalog number: 208-AA-4JJ-10, National Archives and Records Administration.

Miramar, which would become his temporary home and headquarters. The unfriendly manager declined to offer Patton and his staff anything to drink until Stiller threatened to shoot the lock off of his wine cellar. Champagne appeared and everyone imbibed. After dinner Patton returned to his inspection, his staff in tow. He stopped outside a café packed with American soldiers. Standing on the sidewalk, he glared at them through a glass wall. He could see the blue and white patch on their shoulders, identifying them as men from the 3rd Infantry. The men stared back. They had survived their first day of battle and were celebrating. “I wish I was a corporal,” Patton said for the second time.

Turning away from the party in the café, Patton noticed for the first time that Colonel Henriques was wearing his British rank. “Goddammit, Robert, didn’t I tell you to wear an American uniform?” Henriques replied that he was, but Patton was not buying it. “Those goddamn crowns!” he shouted as he pointed at Henriques’s shoulders and helmet. “There haven’t been any goddamn crowns in the American army since the

Declaration of Independence.” He then launched into a humorous comparison of American and British rank, but never cracked a smile. Patton told one of his officers to give Henriques some American army colonel eagles, which he immediately pinned on the colonel’s shoulders. “Get that helmet fixed likewise,” he ordered. “I’ll have it entered into orders.” And with that, Patton headed back to the hotel to sleep.³¹ Only Meeks followed him to his room, where the staff sergeant would slump to the floor outside the door, a Thompson machinegun clutched in his hands.³²

It had been a long day, but it had also been a successful one. Patton had capably gotten his troops ashore under trying circumstances. He understood the importance of supply and personal leadership. He never passed up an opportunity to set an example or teach men under fire to do their job. And he did not hesitate to let his pistols do the talking. “God had been very good to me today,” he confided in his diary before going to sleep.

Yet Patton had failed to take one critical action that day: he never contacted his superior, Lieutenant General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the overall commander of TORCH, who waited in his headquarters at the Rock of Gibraltar, some 260 miles away, for word of Patton’s success or failure on Morocco’s shores. Eisenhower had repeatedly radioed Patton, asking where he was setting up his headquarters, the condition of the port, and whether he needed a squadron of fighter planes. Silence had been the only response. Eisenhower’s staff, bombarded by the British with questions about resupply timetables, referred to Patton’s command as the “lost Western Task Force.” Captain Harry Butcher, Eisenhower’s naval aide, wondered in his diary why Patton had not contacted Eisenhower’s headquarters, since “Patton has planes that could fly couriers with complete dope to Gib[ralter].” To Butcher, Patton’s silence was the second greatest failure of TORCH, right after the communications problems between the U.S. and Royal navies. Eisenhower even sent several reconnaissance aircraft to monitor Patton’s progress, but French fighter planes and unwitting Navy gunners shot them down.³³ Eisenhower eventually resorted to sending the HMS *Welshman*, a fast minelayer, to rendezvous with Hewitt on the USS *Augusta* to deliver dispatches and collect information. It was later discovered that Patton had used the wrong codebooks in sending communications to Eisenhower. The correct ones were stowed in the bottom of one of his ships.³⁴ When Eisenhower later rebuked Patton for his lack of communication, Patton wrote him: “I regret you are mad with me over my failure to communicate, however, I cannot control interstellar space and our radio simply would not work.”³⁵



Figure 5. Wearing his two ivory-handled pistols, Patton stands on Morocco's Fedala beach on November 8, 1942, his first day of battle in World War II. Reading College, UK.

November 8 would not be the last time Patton would taint his battlefield success by failing Eisenhower. In fact, it almost set the precedent for the remainder of their relationship. Patton knew his battlefield success was no guarantee that he would keep his command, and he worried constantly that his boss would send him home for such perceived slights. It would haunt him for the rest of the war. Still, Patton had reason to be proud. His untested force had crossed an ocean and successfully defeated an enemy in the field, even if that enemy fought merely to save its honor. Patton would have 884 more days of war to prove himself, to lead men into battle, to be a great general. It was now his war.