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BILL O'REILLY

& MARTIN DUGARD

Killing Patton

The Strange Death of World War II's Most Audacious General

ALSO BY BILL O'REILLY AND MARTIN DUGARD

Killing Lincoln

Killing Kennedy

Killing Jesus



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*To my father, William O'Reilly,
who served his country as a naval officer in World War II,
and to my grandfather John O'Reilly,
who served in World War I*

We'll win this war, but we'll win it only by fighting and showing the Germans that we've got more guts than they have; or ever will have. We're not just going to shoot the sons-of-bitches, we're going to rip out their living Goddamned guts and use them to grease the treads of our tanks.

GEN. GEORGE S. PATTON JR.
JUNE 5, 1944

Map Legend

Allied



Advance



Highlighted movement



Retreat



Infantry



U.S./U.K.

Armor/
mechanized*



U.S.S.R.

Axis



Military features



Front line



Defensive position



West wall



Clash/event



Battery



Machine-gun
emplacement



Barbwire

*On some maps, only tank symbols are used. In these cases, tanks represent armies or army groups that also include infantry.

White symbols are used periodically to highlight Allied units and their movements.

Physical features



Major roads



Minor roads



Railroads



Rivers



Terrain



Forest



City/town with
urban area

Combatant nationalities



United States



United Kingdom



Canada



France



U.S.S.R.



Germany



Prologue



ROOM 110
U.S. ARMY 130TH STATION HOSPITAL
HEIDELBERG, GERMANY
DECEMBER 21, 1945
5:00 P.M.

The man with forty-five minutes to live cannot defend himself. Gen. George S. Patton Jr. fears no one. But now he sleeps flat on his back in a hospital bed. His upper body is encased in plaster, the result of a car accident twelve days ago. Room 110 is a former utility closet, just fourteen feet by sixteen feet. There are no decorations, pictures on the walls, or elaborate furnishings—just the narrow bed, white walls, and a single high window. A chair has been brought in for Patton’s wife, Beatrice, who endured a long, white-knuckle flight over the North Atlantic from the family home in Boston to be at his bedside. She sits there now, crochet hook moving silently back and forth, raising her eyes every few moments to see if her husband has awakened.

Patton is fond of the finer things in life, and during the course of the Second World War, he made his battlefield headquarters in mansions, palaces, castles, and five-star hotels. But right now the sole concession to luxury is that, as a four-star general, Patton does not have to share his room with another patient.

“Old Blood and Guts,” as his soldiers refer to the sixty-year-old legend, is a man both revered and feared. He has many enemies. Thus the need for the white-helmeted armed guards posted directly outside his door, at the end of the long hallway leading to the hospital lobby, and at every entrance and exit of the building. Nicknamed for their helmets,

these “Snowdrops” protect Patton from the American journalists who have descended on this quiet former cavalry barracks in a great pack, ignoring the ongoing Nuremberg war crime trials so that they might write about Patton’s accident and expected recovery. General Patton “is getting well like a house afire,” the Associated Press reported four days ago, basing its information on the army’s daily 6:00 p.m. briefing about his condition. The story also reported that Patton sat up in bed, throwing off his injury “with a speed reminiscent of his wartime advances.”

The truth, however, is far different. Gen. George S. Patton Jr. is paralyzed from the neck down. Bones in his spine were dislocated when his car collided with an army truck full of drunken joyriding soldiers. Patton’s number three cervical vertebra was shattered, badly bruising his spinal cord. The good news is that he has recovered some movement in his extremities. The bad news is that his doctors believe it is highly unlikely he will walk again.

The reporters don’t know this, and so they work overtime to invade Patton’s privacy to see his amazing recovery for themselves. Some have tried to sneak into Room 110 dressed as nurses or orderlies. Others have bribed hospital staff with Hershey bars and nylons. Thanks to the sentries, however, all of them have failed. The closest call was when Richard H. O’Regan, the same reporter from the Associated Press who wrote of Patton’s remarkable recovery, cadged an interview with Patton’s nurse by pretending to be a patient. For his troubles, O’Regan was able to reveal to the world that doctors were allowing Patton to sip a thimbleful of whisky each night with dinner.

But reporters are the least of Patton’s worries. Throughout the course of the Second World War, he made many high-ranking enemies in Moscow, Berlin, London, and even Washington, DC. Patton’s fiery determination to speak the truth had many powerful men squirming not only during the war, but also afterward. He recently went on the record praising his former German enemies for their skills as soldiers, while also criticizing the Soviet Union as being a foe rather than an ally of the United States. Some have come to see Patton as a roadblock to world peace. And now Patton is at his most vulnerable, an easy target for any of those enemies.

A year ago to this day, Patton was in the midst of the most glorious battle of his career, racing across France with his beloved Third Army to

rescue American forces pinned down at the crossroads in Bastogne, Belgium. The German army had long considered Patton to be the Allies' greatest general, but the Battle of the Bulge, as it would become known, elevated him to legendary status throughout the world.

Now the swaggering, fearless renegade who prowled the front lines in a specially modified Dodge WC57 command car outfitted with a .50-caliber machine gun, siren, and two air horns to announce his arrival is hidden from the public. The George S. Patton who sleeps fitfully as Friday evening descends upon Heidelberg has a low pulse and a high fever. He drank egg-nog for lunch and for a time felt upbeat, but his energy sagged before he finally fell asleep. A blood clot in his lungs made his face turn blue yesterday, and there are fears that another embolism might soon give him more trouble breathing.

The auto accident was brutal. Stitches and bruising cover Patton's head from the bridge of his nose to the top of his scalp, marking the line where doctors sewed a Y-shaped flap of skin back onto his head. His face is gaunt from weight loss, and there are open holes in his cheekbones where doctors drilled into his face to insert steel fish hooks to hold his head in traction. But the general has a high pain threshold and has endured his sufferings with a smile and his usual blue humor. He banters with the nurses, who find him "cute." Despite the fact that he has taken a sudden and unexpected turn for the worse in the past few days, the general still expects to be flown to Beverly General Hospital in Boston to further his recovery.

Beatrice has been with him around the clock, reading to him and calling for the doctors when he has a hard time catching his breath. She has a small room of her own down the hall, but is rarely there. The former heiress is a plain woman with a charismatic personality who wed Patton just a year after he graduated from West Point. Throughout their thirty-five-year marriage, Beatrice has braved the many hardships of military life for her beloved "Georgie," never wavering in her love and support.

Suddenly Patton wakes up. His dark blue eyes flick back and forth, searching for signs of Beatrice.

There she is.

"Are you all right, Georgie?" Beatrice asks. She is every bit as fiery as her husband, a fearless equestrienne and accomplished sailor.

Patton gazes intently at his wife. She is the only woman he ever truly loved, and the mother of his three children. Beatrice leans forward to pat her husband's hand.

"It's so dark," Patton says. "So late." He closes his eyes and falls back to sleep.

Beatrice soon leaves for the hospital mess, where she hopes to grab a quick dinner before returning to the bedside, not knowing that her husband has just spoken his last words.

At 6:00 p.m. the urgent news is delivered for Beatrice to return immediately to Room 110.

But she is too late.

The general whom Nazi Germany feared more than any other, the former Olympic pentathlete, the cavalry officer who once hunted the infamous Pancho Villa across the desert plains of Mexico, and the warrior who publicly stated that he wanted one day to be killed "by the last bullet, in the last battle, of the last war," is already dead.

★ ★ ★ ★

The official military report states that Gen. George S. Patton Jr. "died at 1745, 21 December 1945." A pulmonary embolism, brought on by his twelve days lying immobile, had weakened his heart. The official causes of death, as listed in the army adjutant general's report, are "traumatic myelitis, transverse fourth cervical segment, pulmonary infarction, and myocardial failure, acute."

There is no autopsy. His body is immediately taken to the hospital basement and placed inside what was once a horse stall, where his personal four-star flag is laid over the corpse. At Beatrice's request, Patton is laid to rest at the American Cemetery in Hamm, Luxembourg, near the scene of his greatest battlefield triumph. Years later, when Beatrice falls from a horse and dies, she will be denied burial next to her husband, so her children will secretly smuggle her ashes into Europe and sprinkle them atop the grave.

It is a grave that may hold even deeper secrets.

★ ★ ★ ★

The truth is, some do not believe Patton's death was accidental. He had already survived several "accidents," including the time his personal air-

plane was almost shot down by a British Spitfire fighter plane in April 1945—almost miraculously, Patton escaped injury.

But the auto crash that paralyzed Patton on December 9, 1945, was a far different story. The two-and-a-half-ton GMC army truck that collided with the general's touring car suddenly and inexplicably veered from the opposite lane and into Patton—as if intentionally trying to injure the general. Both the man driving the truck and his two passengers quickly vanished after the incident. No criminal charges were ever filed. No accountability was ever recorded.

Also, both the official accident report and several key witnesses soon went missing. And most ominous of all, a former American intelligence operative confessed in October 1979 that he had planned and participated in the assassination of Gen. George S. Patton Jr.

It was a shocking assertion that was mostly ignored.

And so it was that a man who saw so much death on the battlefields of Europe and Africa officially died in a most pedestrian way.

Officially.