

Most Underrated General of World War II: Alexander Patch

by Keith E. Bonn

This article is excerpted from an upcoming book, Extreme War, by Terrence Poulos, due to be published by the Military Book Club. The article, written by Keith E. Bonn, draws not only from primary source documents, and also secondary source works such as The Story of the Century and Sandy Patch: A Biography of Lt. Gen. Alexander M. Patch, by William K. Wyant. Used with permission from the author.

He was the first American commander to drive the Japanese off a major island; commanded soldiers from North America, Africa, and Europe in a stunningly successful invasion of the European mainland; led the first Allied units to successfully establish themselves along the Rhine; and defeated the last German offensive in the west. Other than Lucian Truscott, he was the American to command a division, corps, and field army in combat. He was the *only* American general to command large forces in three distinct theaters, namely, a division and corps in the Pacific Theater; an army in the Mediterranean Theater during the invasion of southern France; and an army in the European Theater. The field army he commanded fought over the most diverse and difficult terrain in all of western Europe, yet he never lost a major unit, and accomplished every mission assigned. Eisenhower rated him as “more valuable” than several of his much more well-known peers; Barry Goldwater said that he would have given his “right arm” to have served under him. He was deeply admired by his men, and lost his only son, an infantry captain serving under his command in combat.

Despite all of this and more, apart from the soldiers who served under him, only the most serious of World War II buffs know Alexander McCarrell Patch, Jr. as more than a name on a unit icon of small-scale maps of the European Theater of Operations. A variety of coincidental events which overshadowed or obscured his achievements—a consistent record of victory in battle without debacle or mishap; a quiet and unassuming personality; and the preoccupation of the press with disaster, obnoxious personalities, and other sensational news—all combined to ensure that he would be the most unknown and underestimated commander of World War II.

The Early Years

Born at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, in 1889, Patch was the son of a cavalryman and Annie Moore Patch, the daughter of Congressman William S. Moore of Pennsylvania. Of German and Scotch-Irish descent, the senior Patch was an 1877 West Point graduate and veteran of the Indian Wars who was retired in 1891 following wounds sustained in the line of duty. As a result, young Alexander grew up in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, where his parents raised their family of three boys and a girl in the comfortable surroundings made possible by the senior Patch’s pension and his salary as a railroad executive.

As an adolescent, Patch was pugnacious and high-spirited, never backing down from a fight, but never tolerating cruelty to animals or bullying of his friends. Although he was not excited by the idea of an Army career, in consonance with his disciplinarian father’s desire, Patch applied for and earned an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1909. As a cadet, he loathed the sometimes inhumane treatment of plebes by some upperclassmen; as a plebe himself, he rebelled against it, and as an upperclassman, he showed no interest in playing the plebe vs. upperclassmen game. Patch ultimately graduated near the bottom of his class, but was a solid intercollegiate baseball player and pole vaulter who was admired by many of his peers for his consistent refusal to curry favor with his superiors. Commissioned in the infantry on 12 June 1913, Patch was assigned to the 18th Infantry Regiment in Texas.

During duty on the Mexican border in 1915 and in his service in the Punitive Expedition against the *Villistas* in 1916, Patch’s superiors noted a promising ability and sense of professional judgment. Later that year, in November, Patch married his “one and only” from cadet days, Julia A. Littell (a general’s daughter), thus affirming a rock-solid relationship that endured through war, triumph, and tragedy for the rest of his life. During the Great War, Patch and his older brother, Dorst (who had enlisted in 1909 and secured a commission without attending the Military Academy), both deployed to France in June 1917 as infantry captains with the 1st Infantry Division.

Patch commanded the American Expeditionary Force’s machine-gun school at Langres through the rest of 1917 and most of 1918, but gained command of a battalion of the 18th Infantry Regiment in time for the final offensive of the Great War in October 1918. Thus, his combat experience in the Great War was limited, but meaningful, and it was in command. Further, it enabled him to make a direct link between his experience as a trainer and that of a combat commander.

Patch’s Great War experience also included one ominous development: he suffered from a serious bout with pneumonia during much of his tour in France. It was not the last time that he would suffer from the disease that ultimately killed him.

In an army as small as the miniature US Army between the wars, (190,000 men in 1939), Patch managed to keep his hand in training combat troops as well as honing his skills as a coach and mentor of young men.

Between the wars, Patch spent 11 years, parsed out over three separate tours, as Professor of Military Science and Tactics at Staunton Military Academy, a private secondary school in western Virginia, near the Virginia Military Institute (VMI). Here, while Patch honed his skills as a trainer and groomer of young men, he met and befriended Withers A. Burress, the commandant at the VMI, who later commanded the 100th Infantry Division under Patch in Europe in WWII.

One of his last assignments before the US entered WWII was as commander of the 47th Infantry Regiment of the 9th Infantry Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. This assignment was a particularly fortuitous one, as the 9th's commanding general was Jacob Devers, a man who would later figure very prominently in Patch's WWII service

Patch in the Pacific

Barely a month after the Japanese sneak attack at Pearl Harbor, Patch was promoted to major general and assigned to command Task Force 6814, a quickly tossed-together *ad hoc* assembly of roughly divisional size built around two National Guard infantry regiments. The task force was charged with the mission of defending the French colony of New Caledonia from what appeared to be imminent Japanese attack; with things going quite badly for the American Regular Army forces in the Philippines at the time, there was considerable question about the ability of US forces to defeat the Japanese on the ground. So Patch was literally the "man in the arena," the champion personally selected by Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall to go to the southwest Pacific with whatever the Army could scrape together and stand between the rapidly-advancing Japanese and the frantically-preparing Australians.

En route, Patch was again stricken with pneumonia, but overcame it again to arrive in New Caledonia in early March 1942. Although this was literally his first acquaintance with his new command, he busily set about organizing and training them for the formidable task at hand: defending the 1,250-mile-long island.

With New Caledonia secure, Patch's next mission as commanding general of the Americal Division (this name was suggested by PFC David Fonseca, combining "American" with "New Caledonia") was to relieve the 1st Marine Division and, on orders from Admiral Halsey, "eliminate all Japanese forces on Guadalcanal." Landing in August 1942, Marine Major General Archie Vandegrift's division struck the first American offensive blow on the ground against the Japanese who, up until that time, had been seemingly invincible in their defeats of the Americans in the Philippines, the British at Singapore, and the Dutch in the East Indies. Locked in desperate fighting in the pesthole that was Guadalcanal, the Marines and their US Navy supporting elements tenaciously fought a see-saw action that held on to the crucial perimeter around the key airstrip at Henderson Field, but were unable to make decisive headway against constantly-reinforced, aggressive Japanese forces.

On 9 December Patch and the Americal Division officially relieved Vandegrift and the 1st Marine Division. In early January, as the 25th Infantry Division and 2nd Marine Division completed their deployment to Guadalcanal, Patch was promoted to command of the newly-created XIV Corps, the headquarters which controlled them all.

Patch launched the corps' attack on 10 January 1943, and in almost exactly a month of vicious jungle fighting, XIV Corps methodically and effectively cleared the Japanese from Guadalcanal. It was an immensely important victory because it was proof that American ground forces could not only stave off defeat—as the 1st Marine Division had in the first four months of the Guadalcanal operation—but decisively clear the Japanese off a large island.

Typically, few people today associate Patch's name with Guadalcanal. Marine Major General Archie Vandegrift, who was awarded the Medal of Honor and later went on to become the Commandant of the Marine Corps, is the general officer whose name is usually associated with this battle. Partially, this is undoubtedly due to the Marines' legendary public relations talents, and partially, it is a function of timing. Public awareness of the exceptionally important and hard-won victory on Guadalcanal, skillfully engineered by Patch with many of the soldiers he personally trained, was largely lost in the hoopla surrounding his predecessor's publicity and the other major, positive developments in the course of the war. Although it was all fine with the self-effacing, quietly-professional Patch, it was far from the last time that this sort of phenomenon would obscure his magnificent achievements.

After Guadalcanal, Marshall recalled Patch to command IV Corps at Fort Lewis. Marshall had been apprised, accurately, that the campaigns in the southwest Pacific had severely degraded Patch's health, and, remembering his near-run bout with pneumonia en route to New Caledonia, the Chief of Staff brought him back to a more hospitable climate. During the period at Lewis, Patch built a staff, combining officers who had served with him in the southwest Pacific with many who had been already serving in IV Corps when Patch arrived. To a very great extent, this was the staff that Patch would take with him for the rest of the war, so they were a very cohesive and well-coordinated group indeed. Patton was not the only one to derive intense loyalty from his subordinate staffers.

Seventh Army in the ETO

In March 1944, Patch assumed command of the Seventh Army, then only a headquarters in North Africa. The Seventh Army would have tactical control of all allied troops during the upcoming Operation ANVIL (later re-dubbed DRAGOON), the invasion of Southern France. Under the command of the North African Theater (which became designated as the Mediterranean Theater in November) and using three veteran US divisions of VI Corps under the experienced and reliable Lucian Truscott (3rd, 36th, and 45th Infantry Divisions, all veterans of extensive mountain fighting in Italy) to make his main attack, Patch also had other important assets at his disposal. A provisional airborne division—with American and British parachute and glider troops—would land well inland of the beaches to prevent rapid reinforcement of the defenders, cut off German withdrawals, and interfere with the Germans' command, control, and communications systems. Commencing on D+1, the equivalent of two French corps would follow the American assault troops; these consisted of mostly soldiers from French colonies in northern and western Africa, led by white French officers. The political pressure on Patch to get these French troops into combat as quickly as possible had no parallel in the Normandy operation.

Thus, Patch would command soldiers from three continents in an invasion which, if not as complex as the Overlord landings, were nevertheless substantial and elaborate, and which posed some very different challenges from those encountered in Normandy. The choke points for the landing area were much further inland than the ones for the Overlord beaches, so the airborne landings would have to be much deeper (ten miles). This vastly increased the risk to both the airborne and amphibious forces. Also, the details of the airborne operation were planned in just five weeks and executed by an *ad hoc* unit whose subordinate formations consisted of one US parachute infantry regiment, three separate US parachute infantry battalions, a British parachute brigade, and numerous separate glider-borne units—some of which, such as the Anti-Tank Company of the Nisei 442nd Infantry Regiment and several 4.2" heavy mortar outfits, had never even *seen* a glider before.

Apart from the amphibious and airborne landings of VI Corps and the Provisional Airborne Division, there were pre-H-hour assaults by American and Canadian commandos (the famed 1st Special Service Force, or "Devil's Brigade"), French Commandos, and French naval infantry. Patch's plan incorporated massive deception operations intended to mask the true location and nature of the main landings. A huge signals deception effort seemed to indicate a shift of forces in north Africa, and a variety of naval diversionary efforts suggested landings at locations as diverse as Genoa, Italy, Nice, and Marseilles. All of this was planned and executed by Patch's headquarters, which was only a fraction of the size of Eisenhower's in England, and had nothing like the all-out priority of Overlord from the Combined Chiefs.

Executed commencing 15 August 1944, Dragoon and the Seventh Army's subsequent pursuit of German forces up the Rhône Valley were very successful. As late as 10 August, German intelligence was convinced that no landings would take place on the Mediterranean coast at all, and as late as 12 August—the day the invasion force put to sea—German intelligence could not predict whether the landings would be in France or Italy. Even on D-day—as the first Allied paratroopers hit the French earth and the French commandos began landing on the islands just off the invasion beaches—the commander and staff of the 19th Army could not determine the location of Patch's main effort.

As a result, unlike the Normandy landings, which failed to result in the capture of a single usable major port, the southern France invasion yielded two major deep-water ports—Marseilles and Toulon—which were put into use by early September. The especial rapidity of the American assault landings and the nimble arrival of the equivalent of two French corps assured the rapid expansion of the beachhead and the destruction of two German divisions, the 242nd and 244th Infantry. The rest of Army Group G was severely disorganized and quickly put to flight. Ultimately, over 88,000 Germans from Army Group G were captured by the Seventh Army during its pursuit of German forces up the Rhône River valley. This astounding total is all the more amazing when contrasted with the total German prisoner haul from the much more famous Falaise encirclement, which netted—depending on how one figures it—only 50,000–70,000 German prisoners.

Patch's Seventh Army's accomplishments are spectacular for more reasons than these. Far less air support was available, for example, than had been allotted to the Overlord efforts. Less than 10 percent of the 3,500 tactical aircraft that had been allotted to the Normandy landings were tasked by the combined Mediterranean Allied Air Forces for support of the Dragoon landings. The mechanized and armored forces available to Patch were a mere shadow of those made available to Bradley. Aside from the very temporary use of one combat command (brigade) of the French 1st Armored Division, Patch could only count on three US separate tank battalions, three US separate tank destroyer battalions, and the VI Corps' mechanized cavalry reconnaissance squadron. The next time additional armored forces would be made available to the Seventh Army would not be until XV Corps was allotted from Third Army in late September.

Nevertheless, Patch made optimal use of what he had. Attaching most of his armor to his three infantry divisions to enable combined arms operations for pursuit of German forces withdrawing northward up the Rhône Valley, Patch created Task Force (TF) Butler, commanded by the VI Corps Assistant Commanding General. Built around the 117th Cavalry Squadron, before the end of August, in conjunction with the XII Tactical Air Command and elements of the

36th Infantry Division, this small *ad hoc* task force did much to cut off and bottle up German 19th Army units attempting to withdraw to the Vosges Mountains and Belfort Gap, their ultimate destination. German units such as the 198th and 338th Infantry Divisions completed the withdrawal from southern France with their combat strength depleted by about 80 percent, while American casualties amounted to less than 5 percent of the forces committed.

The Seventh Army's rapid progress northward forced all of Army Group G to withdraw to northeastern France, and resulted in the liberation of fully 65 percent of all French territory. As Eisenhower said after the war, "there was no development of that period [summer 1944] which added more decisively to our advantage or aided us more in accomplishing the final and complete defeat of German forces than did this attack coming up the Rhône valley."

Typically, Patch himself was very low key about all of this, and remained focused on the operations at hand. When his photo appeared on the cover of the 25 August 1944 *Time* magazine, the Seventh Army Public Information Officer rushed in to his office with a copy, only to have Patch ignore the story inside altogether. According to the secretary of his general staff during the war, Patch genuinely hated the limelight and avoided publicity for himself.

Apart from the *Time* article, however, Patch's accomplishments went virtually unnoticed by the press, and so by the rest of the world. In the same week that his Seventh Army was routing German forces and beginning the end of the occupation of two-thirds of France, the fierce fighting around Falaise and Argentan was nearing a climax. The so-called "GI's General," Omar Bradley, commanded First Army in this important battle, and George Patton commanded the recently created Third. Patton was always avidly watched by the press.

Ten days after the Dragoon landings, as Toulon and Marseilles were on the verge of falling to the Seventh Army and the remainder of Army Group G was departing from southern France, the German commandant of Paris disobeyed his orders and let Paris be liberated by Jacques Leclerc and his soon-to-be-famous French 2nd Armored Division. On the same day, Germany lost an important ally as Romania switched sides, and declared war on Germany.

Although Patch's Seventh Army's accomplishment was, indeed, decisive for the liberation of France, once again, other momentous events, occurring simultaneously, grabbed the headlines and stole the thunder from Patch and his consistent - victories.

In mid-September, the two French corps under Patch's command were stripped away to form the new First French Army, and along with Seventh Army. This came under command of the newly-formed Sixth Army Group, commanded by Jacob Devers. At about the same time, the Sixth Army Group came under command of Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces, and was thus no longer controlled by the North African Theater of Operations. Left with only a single corps under his command, Patch nevertheless pushed forward, pressing back German forces into the western slopes of the High Vosges mountain range. By steadily forcing the Germans back from the Moselle River, he deprived them of choice defensive terrain, and compelled them to occupy their main defensive lines in the Vosges before the massive German engineer and labor forces committed there could complete them. Even as Operation MARKET-GARDEN—the airborne thrust through the Netherlands toward the Rhine—was grinding to a dismal conclusion and the British 1st Airborne Division was being reduced to combat ineffectiveness, Seventh Army was gradually, consistently, pushing ever forward.

In late September, XV Corps was transferred to Patch's control, and the Seventh Army's combat power doubled. Upon losing the corps, George Patton, ever the *prima donna* and supremely childish egotist, delivered these sour grapes to his Army Group commander, Bradley, "I hope [Devers's] plan goes sour." Eisenhower, who barely tolerated Patton but despised Devers, expected little or no benefit from gaining control (and responsibility) for his army group, beyond support for Bradley's Twelfth Army Group efforts.

Aside from Eisenhower's well-documented personal antipathy for Devers, however, there was a certain amount of logic to Eisenhower's attitude. The Seventh Army's logistical support originated 400 miles to the south, in Marseilles. A single rail line and a single highway, National Route 7, was the tenuous link to whatever supplies the Seventh Army could get from those far away docks . . . which were still under control of the North African Theater of Operations, and therefore competing with the needs of the more established Fifth Army in Italy. (This situation was not resolved until November, when the logistical support of the Sixth Army Group through Marseilles and Toulon became an ETO responsibility.)

Further, the terrain facing the Seventh Army was the most easily defensible in all of western Europe. The High Vosges mountains (differentiated from the low Vosges, which lie north of the Saverne Gap) had never before in the history of warfare been penetrated by attack. Neither Roman, nor Hun, Burgundian, Swede, French, Austrian, or German had been able to pierce the rugged, heavily forested, range that runs from the Belfort Gap in the south, parallel to the Rhine River, all the way north to the Saverne Gap. In World War I, some of the costliest fighting of the first year of the war took place there, yet the geographical crest of the Vosges remained, by and large, the political border, just as it had been since 1871. The Germans didn't even try to force the passes of the High Vosges in 1940, preferring the route through the Ardennes and the Low Countries.

Since the late summer of 1944, German military engineers had been using both volunteer and slave labor to construct a series of massive defensive lines on the western slopes of the Vosges. Thick barbed wire barriers, deep tank ditches, dense minefields, carefully sited pillboxes, and easily-executed abatis and log crib road blocks turned the High Vosges into a defensive maze that only contributed to the already naturally formidable defensive advantages of the terrain. With the fog and rains of autumn coming on, and the vicious Vosges winters not far behind, the German high command, OKW (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*) fully expected the Vosges Winter Line to hold until at least April 1945. Eisenhower expectations were about the same.

Patch and Devers were to surprise Eisenhower and OKW, however. As the Seventh Army's VI Corps ground its way into the western slopes of the Vosges in mid-October, and XV Corps simultaneously fought their way through the forested approaches to the Saverne Gap, they continually deprived the Germans of time and space for improving their defensive posture. By applying the kind of constant, steady pressure that his men used on Guadalcanal, Patch wore out German units faster than they could be rebuilt, while carefully maintaining his own units' strength and cohesion. In the month leading up to the Seventh Army's great autumn offensive in November 1944, the Americans were attacking in miserable weather conditions and in terrain that not only eliminated the effectiveness of tactical air support, but minimized the effectiveness of what little armor the Seventh Army possessed. Despite these disadvantages, the Seventh Army inflicted more than 24 percent more casualties on the Germans than they sustained themselves, an extremely unusual proportion for an army conducting offensive operations.

Despite the favorable casualty ratio, Patch still agonized over the casualties his men suffered. Although unanimous testimonials by his staff and subordinate leaders prove that Patch was deeply, personally moved by the casualties suffered by those under this command, the death, on 22 October, of the commander of Company C/315th Infantry Regiment had an especially severe impact on him. On that day, while leading an assault against entrenched German positions near the bloody Forest of Parroy, Captain Alexander M. Patch III was killed in action. The grief that losing his only son caused Patch was only paralleled by the sadness and frustration of not being able to comfort his wife, Julia, over the loss. Despite the profound shock and sorrow he felt, Patch buried his son at the American military cemetery at Epinal a few days after his death, and went back to the business of winning the war. As he pointed out to his wife in a letter, they were far from unique in their situation.

By the time the 44th, 100th, and 103rd had arrived to bolster Seventh Army's combat power for its November offensive to penetrate the German Winter Line and gain the Vosges passes, Patch had postured his army for success in every way he could. The supply problems stemming from both the unexpectedly rapid advance up from the southern France beaches and the tenuously long lines of communication were largely solved by late October. More importantly, by steadily, if unspectacularly, pressing ahead against the German 19th Army's dwindling infantry reserves, Patch had created an opportunity for success entirely unexpected by Eisenhower or the pouting Patton to the north and west. What had, in October, amounted to a virtually even infantry battle (the Americans possessed no more than a 1.2 to 1 foxhole strength advantage) had become a much more advantageous ratio by November. Additionally, the Germans were now in their Winter Line positions; there was nowhere left for them to go if they withdrew, and besides, Hitler had decreed that there would be "no retreat" from the Winter Line. Patch had hamstringed the Germans into a do-or-die situation, with no tactical options but to stand, stationary, and fight it out.

Even with the pronounced numerical and tactical advantages produced by his own operations, however, there were numerous factors mitigating against the Seventh Army's success in its drive to penetrate the Vosges barrier. First, the weather was getting only worse, and the ice and sleet combined with the winding roads to eliminate the efficacy of armor support. Besides, German antitank defenses were well developed and effective; *panzerfausts* and other close-range antitank weapons were ideal for the Vosges terrain. Second, the Seventh Army was allotted only 72 P-47 fighter bombers for close air support during November, and the mostly overcast weather limited even those few aircraft to a handful of flying days. Finally, the Germans were fighting from prepared positions, on the doorstep of the Reich. As the historian/veteran Gerhard Graser of the German 198th Infantry Division put it in the division history:

"The fighting always consisted of small battles in the underbrush, man on man. The American infantryman, accustomed to the protection of superior airpower and artillery, and used to advancing behind tanks, suddenly found themselves robbed of their most important helpers. The persistent bad weather hindered their air force, and the terrain limited the mobility of their armor to a significant degree. Here the individual soldier mattered the most. For the German soldier, there was the courage of despair that gave rise to the utmost resistance: After many years of combat all over Europe, his back was to the wall of the homeland. On their side, the Americans believed that the banner of victory was already half-fastened to their colors and that it would take only one last energetic exertion for them to victoriously end the war. So both sides fought with unbelievable bitterness and severity."

To the north, things were not going well for Bradley's Twelfth Army Group. Elements of Hodges' First Army were dashing themselves to pieces against Germans dug into the Hürtgen Forest. Whole regiments and even entire divisions were being destroyed as the First Army failed to penetrate the forest barrier in its zone. Patton's XX Corps was slogging it

out against Germans ensconced in the nineteenth-and early twentieth-century fortifications at Metz; between mid-September, when the attack on Metz began, and the end of November, when the final forts fell, three of Patton's divisions sustained stunning casualties in their efforts to move beyond the ancient fortress on the Moselle.

Unlike these failures and near-failures befalling his famous peers, Patch's army was on the verge of a historic achievement. Beginning 12 November, the northern division of VI Corps, the green 100th Infantry Division, commanded by Patch's old friend from Staunton days, Withers Burrese, began clawing its way straight through the equally-green 708th Volks-Grenadier Division on the east bank of the Meurthe River, east of Baccarat. As the 100th's success forced the 708th's commander, Josef Krieger, to reinforce his southern wing, Patch launched the XV Corps into the weakened northern wing, along the boundary between the 708th and the 553rd Volks-Grenadier Division, to the north. Not only did the XV Corps attack fall on a newly-weakened sector, but it thrust between two divisions which belonged to two entirely different field armies; coordination between the two German divisions was practically non-existent as a result.

As the XV Corps plowed through uncoordinated opposition and approached the Saverne Pass—threatening to outflank the entire German Winter Line—Patch unleashed the rest of VI Corps, to the south, against the High Vosges passes. With every available reserve force committed to the north, the 19th Army had nothing with which to stem the tide of the attacking 3rd, 36th, and 103rd Infantry Divisions. By 23 November, Seventh Army elements had reached the Rhine at Strasbourg and were pouring through the Vosges passes onto the plain of Alsace. The German Winter Line was breached, the first Allied troops had successfully reached the Upper Rhine, and the 19th Army was being cornered in what became known as The Colmar Pocket. By refusing to engage in frontal attacks against dug-in German defenders on the doorstep of the *Reich*, but rather, creating opportunities for maneuver by cleverly and carefully phasing his own offensive strikes, Patch saved his men the ordeals endured by elements of Patton's and Hodges's armies to the north. He also, once again, quietly and competently produced an unprecedented victory. For the first time in history, an army crossed the Vosges barrier against bitter resistance.

The Seventh Army's stunning success also had another consequence; Eisenhower was presented with the very real option of jumping the Rhine between Strasbourg and Rastatt, and eliminating the last great geographical barrier to the conquest of Germany. Exactly why he decided against this electrifying opportunity—one which truly could have changed the course of the war in so many ways—has never been satisfactorily answered by historians, and the reasons expressed by Eisenhower himself in *Crusade in Europe* are nonsense. In any event, he ordered Devers to turn Patch's army 90 degrees to the north, to attack toward the southern border of the Palatinate, in support of Patton's flagging efforts toward the Saar. American forces would now not cross the Rhine until March 1945, and another opportunity for the world to recognize the brilliance of Sandy Patch was lost.

As the Seventh Army ground its way north, now partially traversing the easily-defensible Low Vosges range north of the Saverne Pass, XV Corps encountered the most heavily fortified sector of the Maginot Line. The fortifications of the so-called Ensemble de Bitche were built to withstand attacks from all sides. In 1940, the fortresses of this sector had been attacked by German forces from precisely the same aspect, that is, the south, as they were about to be again by elements of the Seventh Army in 1944. Indeed, they had held out until a full week after the rest of the French Army surrendered in that first spring of World War II. Such would not be the case when Patch's men attacked. Although aerially-delivered 500-pound bombs and direct fire from 240mm howitzers and eight-inch guns made no discernible difference to the German defenders, the Seventh Army penetrated the Maginot Line just west of Bitche by employing patient, methodical close assault by infantry and combat engineers. Unlike the Third Army, which was held up for two and a half months by the pre-World War I defenses at Metz, the Seventh Army punched through the most massive and modern fortifications in the world near Bitche in less than a week.

This tremendous accomplishment was, once again, overshadowed by disaster elsewhere. Just as the last German defenders of the great Maginot forts in the XV Corps zone were being cleared out of their steel-reinforced concrete fastness, three German field armies caught Omar Bradley, Courtney Hodges, and their subordinate leaders completely by surprise in the Ardennes Forest to the north. Despite the courageous efforts of the soldiers of several American divisions, the First Army was blown back from its lines along a multiple corps front. Two of the three infantry regiments of the 106th Infantry Division surrendered to the Germans, and the rest of the division was knocked out of the war. For the second time in a month, the 28th Infantry Division was badly mauled. The 7th Armored Division was flung aside with heavy casualties, and, along with elements of the 10th Armored Division, the 101st Airborne Division was completely surrounded at Bastogne. Other outfits, such as the 2nd and 99th Infantry Divisions, were barely hanging on to their positions, locked in desperate combat with the attackers.

As the Third Army pulled out of the line to counterattack into the southern shoulder of the German salient, Eisenhower ordered Sixth Army Group to suspend offensive operations and shift westward to fill the gap left by departing Third Army units in the Saar. With some VI Corps units already engaged in the *Westwall*, and XV Corps moving northward to do the same, Patch ordered a withdrawal to defensible positions. To cover the vastly extended line, Patch improvised, using even an engineer group and a task force composed of disparate mechanized cavalry and armored infantry units.

As the First and Third Armies scrambled to recover from their disastrous intelligence lapse in the Ardennes, Patch's intelligence officer, Colonel Bill Quinn, announced the detection of a chilling development opposite XV Corps. Based on the few aerial photos taken during brief holes in the general western European overcast, patrol reports, and the disappearance of several important German formations not accounted for in the Ardennes or elsewhere, Quinn audaciously predicted another German offensive, aimed at Bitche, on the boundary between the XV and VI Corps. Although some senior Seventh Army commanders were highly skeptical, Patch was convinced by Quinn's argument. He directed that preparations be immediately undertaken to prepare for a major German offensive, expected on New Year's Eve.

That offensive, known as Operation *NORDWIND*, fell precisely when and where Quinn had predicted. With nothing less than the Saverne Pass as its terrain objective and the division of American and French forces in Alsace as the strategic goal, the attacking German XIII SS, XC, and LXXXIX Corps drove directly into carefully-placed American minefields, machine-gun protective fires, and artillery concentrations. Although the German units managed to achieve an overall infantry numerical superiority of almost exactly the same magnitude that the Seventh Army had enjoyed the previous autumn when the tactical tables were turned, they were unable to effect a breakthrough anywhere but in the sector of the mechanized task force Patch had arrayed in the most mountainous sector of the Low Vosges. Even here, despite the premature, precipitous withdrawal of one of the cavalry squadrons, elements of XV Corps' 45th Infantry Division, assisted by the infantry regiments of the newly-arrived 70th Infantry Division, sealed off the ten-kilometer gap between Bitche and Neunhoffen by 3 January. On the next day, the staff of the 17th SS-Panzer-Grenadier Division was relieved for the full-strength division's failure to break through the American lines along the boundary of the 44th and 100th Infantry Divisions. At the same time, the entire XC Corps called off its offensive operations. On 5 January, the German armored reserves intended for exploitation of the situation were withdrawn and sent toward Wissembourg, well to the east, and on 6 January, the last German offensive operations in the LXXXIX Corps zone were terminated. Outnumbered overall and, in some sectors, suffering from odds against them of 3–1 or more, the units of the Seventh Army completely frustrated the Germans' attempts to break through to Saverne from the northwest.

Although Patch and his men had won an important victory, the Germans were far from done with their offensive. On 5 January, Army Group Upper Rhine, personally commanded by SS Chief Heinrich Himmler, attacked across the Rhine at Gambenheim with the 553rd Volks-Grenadier Division of XIV SS Corps. While VI Corps attention focused on the bridgehead, XXXIX Panzer Corps attacked southward, down the Wissembourg Corridor on the Plain of Alsace, with the 21st Panzer and 25th Panzer Grenadier Divisions. Originally earmarked for exploiting the anticipated breakthrough near Bitche, these divisions now attempted to take Saverne from the east. Over the next two weeks, the Germans threw in the best formations they had left in the West, including the 10th SS-Panzer Division, the 7th Parachute Division, as well as various infantry formations, in the last, desperate attempt to split the Americans from the French and bring about a separate armistice.

Patch's response was both rational and effective. Although, for political reasons, he was overruled in his desire to withdraw American forces to the much more defensible eastern edge of the Vosges Mountains, Patch's forces conducted a series of delays and defenses that thoroughly wore out the attackers. At this point, Patch was saddled with nine incompletely trained infantry regiments that had been deployed without their parent divisions and concomitant supporting units and command and control headquarters. He had already attached the three belonging to the 70th Infantry Division to the 45th for use in plugging the gap left by Task Force Hudelson in the Low Vosges, and then parceled out the units of the 63rd Infantry Division's regiments to the 44th and 100th Infantry Divisions for use in reinforcing their defenses. Although the arrangement was far less than optimal and resulted in the wholesale loss of several rifle companies, it was infinitely preferable to the loss of entire divisions, as Hodges had with the inexperienced 106th in the Ardennes. Between 6 and 23 January, the regiments of the 42nd Infantry Division were attached to the 79th Infantry Division and, in concert with the 14th Armored Division, and later, the 12th Armored and 103rd Infantry Division (and, at the end, even the 101st Airborne Division), these combined units ended the Germans' last offensive in the west in what veterans of both sides termed some of the most savage fighting of the entire war.

To this day, little is generally known about this, the spectacularly successful rebuff of Operation *NORDWIND*. In *The Final Crisis* (Aegis, 1999), scholar and veteran of the campaign (as an assistant BAR gunner in the 42nd Infantry Division), Richard Engler postulates that a variety of factors combined to make the public unaware of this tremendous achievement. Among them were war weariness by an American public that had no stomach for a second crisis in as many months and a press that was preoccupied with the astounding near catastrophe in the Ardennes.

Bill Quinn had a more direct analysis. Referring to the far greater publicity received by other generals in other contemporaneous battles, he said, "The way to get recognition is to lose your ass—get the shit kicked out of you." There is undeniable merit to his argument. Perhaps exactly who had lost their asses when was what the Supreme Commander, Eisenhower, was thinking about on 1 February 1945 when he ranked the value of Patch's services ahead of Hodges and Simpson!

Patch spent the rest of the winter preparing the Seventh Army for its part in the final offensive to crush Germany. For the most part, this consisted of defensive operations and local patrolling, although Patch took advantage of the quiet weeks to integrate new outfits such as the (finally complete) 42nd, 63rd, and 70th Infantry Divisions, as well as the late-arriving 71st Infantry Division. (Second Lieutenant John S. D. Eisenhower led a rifle platoon in that outfit, briefly.) From late January to mid-February, Patch had to detach the recently-constituted XXI Corps to the French 1st Army to help wipe out the Colmar Pocket, but of the units which remained under Patch's control throughout the winter, defensive operations and training were the norm. A few limited objective attacks, such as the 70th's attack at Forbach in the Saar in late February, were conducted to better posture the Seventh Army for the commencement of Operation UNDERTONE, the drive into the Palatinate in mid-March.

On 15 March 1945, the Seventh Army began the drive that took it into the heart of Europe. Crossing the Rhine at multiple locations north and south of Worms, the Seventh Army drove into Swabia and across Bavaria. Ultimately, it was, fittingly, units from Patch's army which swarmed through the "National Redoubt," proving the fictitious nature of its existence; it was Seventh Army's 103rd Infantry Division which linked up, in the Brenner Pass, with US Fifth Army elements driving north in Italy; and it was Seventh's 71st Infantry Division which thrust furthest into eastern Europe, meeting elements of the Red Army east of Linz by 8 May.

The magnificent, and largely ignored, performance of the Seventh Army in Europe was not without its lost battles. The 12th Armored Division needlessly lost a full combat command to the 10th SS-Panzer Division on the Alsatian Plain near Herrlisheim on 16/17 January; five companies of the veteran 45th Infantry Division's 157th Infantry Regiment were wiped out in the hills above Reipertswiller in the Low Vosges by SS-Mountain Infantry Regiment 11 of the 6th SS-Mountain Division in late January.

There were, however, never any wholesale failures of whole corps, such as there were at Metz, in the Ardennes, or in the Hürtgen, or losses of whole divisions, as with the British 1st Parachute Division at Arnhem, or the US 28th Infantry Division in the Hürtgen or again, a month later, in the Ardennes, or the 106th Infantry Division in the Schnee Eifel. Patch's careful, yet forceful and aggressive, style of fighting prevented such debacles. Even in the pain of the grief caused by his son's death in combat while under his command, Patch never made foolish choices that resulted in the unnecessary deaths of his men. Sending a battalion task force 80 kilometers behind enemy lines to liberate his son-in-law from German captivity—as Patton did in March, 1945 with Task Force Baum—would never have even seriously occurred to Patch. Losing it in its entirety, save 15 men, as Patton did, would have been unthinkable for the Seventh Army commander.

Patch was the consummate team player. In sharp contrast to Patton's childish wish, upon losing XV Corps to Patch, for the Sixth Army Group's failure in upcoming operations, Patch behaved magnanimously when confronted with similar or worse disappointments. In March 1945, for example, when Eisenhower proposed that Third Army be assigned objectives within the Seventh Army's zone, thus causing massive command and control challenges for long-planned Operation UNDERTONE, Patch's response was, "We're all in the same army," and that the objective was to defeat the Germans.

Also unlike Patton, who verbally—and sometimes physically—scourged his soldiers, Patch was deeply caring and quietly compassionate. One of his senior staff officers recalled "Patch was compassionate more than any other commander in his love and care of the soldiers." He described him as "Lovable, kind. A modest man," and added, "I loved that man."

Despite all this, in his report of operations published after the war, Eisenhower rewarded Patch and his men with a total of eight pages of text, out of a total of 180 in the report. This obvious snub may have been prompted by Eisenhower's steadfast dislike of Patch's boss, Jacob Devers, but was nonetheless an inaccurate portrayal of Seventh Army's accomplishments, and was grossly unfair to Patch's soldiers, who were, after all, Eisenhower's, too.

It was undoubtedly this kind of ingratitude, combined with Patch's genuine commitment to his soldiers, that led Patch to his final significant act on behalf of the soldiers of the Seventh Army. Having left command at the end of May 1945, Patch was slated by General George Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, to command an army in the planned invasion of Japan. However, with Japan's capitulation after the nuclear strikes at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Patch was reassigned to organizational duties in the Pentagon. Even in the drudgery of the Pentagon assignment, though, Patch never relented in his loyalty to his men.

The Army had granted campaign credit for all participants in the efforts to defeat the German offensive in the Ardennes in December and January, but had not granted similar recognition to the Seventh Army's soldiers for their much more successful repulse of *NORDWIND*. This had resulted, *inter alia*, in the award of another "battle star" to be proudly worn on their European-African-Middle Eastern campaign ribbons by every member of Third and First Armies who helped stem the tide of Ardennes thrust . . . but in no such recognition for soldiers of the Seventh Army. Indeed, the additional campaign credit had resulted in the receipt of additional "points" for the Ardennes veterans, which meant earlier transfer stateside for demobilization and the return to civilian life, the thing which meant the most in the world for most ETO veterans.

After failing in his attempt to convince Eisenhower of the justice of granting Seventh Army veterans a campaign credit for the defeat of *NORDWIND*, in the autumn of 1944, Patch went over his head to Marshall. His passionate and well-articulated plea resulted in a reversal of Eisenhower's decision, and later, the "Ardennes" campaign credit was changed to "Ardennes-Alsace;" every soldier of the Seventh Army who took part in defeating the last German offensive in the west was finally officially recognized for his significant contribution to victory in Europe. Unfortunately, by the time the decision became official, practically all of the men so affected had long been demobilized—late. However, to this day, Seventh Army veterans are still seeing to it that their military records are being amended to reflect the additional campaign credit . . . thanks to their quiet, compassionate, committed commander, Sandy Patch.

The final factor in ensuring that Patch would go unheralded and unrecognized occurred in November 1945. As had happened in World War I and twice in World War II, Patch contracted pneumonia on 14 November 1945 and succumbed a week later, just two days shy of his fifty-sixth birthday. In a small ceremony a few days later, his remains were interred in the cemetery at his *alma mater*, the United States Military Academy at West Point. Asked by Maxwell Taylor, the Superintendent at USMA, if she wanted a cadet honor guard for the interment ceremony, Patch's wife replied, "Absolutely not." She explained that as a cadet himself, the general hated being called out for details to bury generals of whom the cadets had never heard.

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