

Patton: Always the Actor

THE PATTON PAPERS 1885-1940, by Martin Blumenson (Houghton Mifflin, \$15).

Reviewed by S. L. A. Marshall

General Paul D. Harkins did an excellent and kindly job of presenting the later papers of the late General George S. Patton in "War As I Knew It," published in 1947, which was largely a reflection of the immortal Georgie in his great years.

Colonel Martin Blumenson, no idolater but a scholar who believes in letting the chips fall — gently — where they may, was introduced to the trove of earlier Patton papers and invited to annotate them in two volumes. Blumenson is a stylist, well-schooled in military matters. Despite the span of years covered, the work flows smoothly, thanks to the quality of his interpolations and the candor of his interpretations.

Harkins got at the histrionic essence of Patton's generalship, which attracted legions of men and made them feel fortunate that he commanded. In addition, he was the superb gambler, the bold plunger who could wring the last dividend from a fluid situation. On the other hand, when up against solid works, he had no special magic; his moves to break out of the Bastogne salient in January, 1945, were ill-conceived and terribly wasteful.

The Blumenson papers make clear that these were inherent character traits. Patton was ever the actor, hurrying to hold the stage, to be seen and heard and admired as a headliner. He was consciously a player of parts, set on winning. As a young battle commander, he did not slight organizational preparation, though when committed he tended to overreach. The resulting trouble was predictable.

On the personal side, he bucked incontinently for his decorations, though they were hard won. Time and again he pulled wires to get choice assignments which were usually denied him.

Toward higher-ups such as John J. Pershing, Douglas MacArthur, C. P. Summerall and Hugh Drum, he was ever the eager, apple-polishing correspondent. His hand was always reaching for the seemingly upcoming Big Man to hitch a ride to high place, though often he made the wrong choice.



George S. Patton Jr. as a young lieutenant of cavalry in 1910

About the letters, memos, and staff writings — they are literate, occasionally droll, rarely dull, though they definitely fail to reveal depths of military thought or shafts of original genius. In the 1930s Patton was fighting to save the horse cavalry as a shock combat instrument and was as muddled in his thinking about the future place of armor as was MacArthur.

That did not keep him from ridiculing writers, such as J. F. C. Fuller and B. H. Liddell Hart, who saw the way more clearly, nor stop him from finally getting on the right race that he rode to greatness.

Two lines from France penned to his beloved Beatrice state the theme of the papers as a whole: "This is a very egotistical account of the affair, full of 'I' but it will interest you. I at least proved to my own satisfaction that I have nerve."