

The True Story of the Patton Prayer

The author of General Patton's famous Third Army Prayer reveals the story of its origin, paying tribute both to the general's trust in God and to the power of faith-filled prayer.

by Msgr. James H. O'Neill

Many conflicting and some untrue stories have been printed about General [George S.] Patton and the Third Army Prayer. Some have had the tinge of blasphemy and disrespect for the Deity. Even in *War As I Knew It* by General Patton, the footnote on the Prayer by Col. Paul D. Harkins, Patton's Deputy Chief of Staff, while containing the elements of a funny story about the General and his Chaplain, is not the true account of the prayer incident or its sequence.

As the Chief Chaplain of the Third Army throughout the five campaigns on the Staff of General Patton, I should have some knowledge of the event because at the direction of General Patton I composed the now world-famous Prayer, and wrote Training Letter No. 5, which constitutes an integral, but untold, part of the prayer story. These incidents, narrated in sequence, should serve to enhance the memory of the man himself, and cause him to be enshrined by generations to come as one of the greatest of our soldiers. He had all the traits of military leadership, fortified by genuine trust in God, intense love of country, and high faith in the American soldier. He had no use for half-measures. He wrote this line a few days before his death: "Anyone in any walk of life who is content with mediocrity is untrue to himself and to American tradition." He was true to the principles of his religion, Episcopalian, and was regular in Church attendance and practices, unless duty made his presence impossible.

Divine Intervention Needed

The incident of the now famous Patton Prayer commenced with a telephone call to the Third Army Chaplain on the morn-

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A great leader and a great American, General George S. Patton Jr. (pictured circa 1944) exhibited not only military genius, but genuine trust in God, intense love of country, and real concern for the men under his command.



AP/U.S. Army Signal Corps

Aided by bad weather that rendered American air power ineffective, German forces broke through the American lines during what became known as the Battle of the Bulge. Had the bad weather persisted, there is no telling how far the Germans would have advanced.

ing of December 8, 1944, when the Third Army Headquarters were located in the Caserne Molifor, in Nancy, France: "This is General Patton; do you have a good prayer for weather? We must do something about those rains if we are to win the war." My reply was that I know where to look for such a prayer, that I would locate, and report within the hour. As I hung up the telephone receiver, about eleven in the morning, I looked out on the steadily falling rain, "immoderate" I would call it — the same rain that had plagued Patton's Army throughout the Moselle and Saar Campaigns from September until now, December 8. The few prayer books at hand contained no formal prayer on weather that might prove acceptable to the Army Commander. Keeping his immediate objective

in mind, I typed an original and an improved copy on a 5" X 3" filing card:

Almighty and most merciful Father, we humbly beseech Thee, of Thy great goodness, to restrain these immoderate rains with which we have had to contend. Grant us fair weather for Battle. Graciously hearken to us as soldiers who call upon Thee that, armed with Thy power, we may advance from victory to victory, and crush the oppression and wickedness of our enemies and establish Thy justice among men and nations. Amen.

I pondered the question, what use would General Patton make of the prayer? Surely not for private devotion. If he intended

it for circulation to chaplains or others, with Christmas not far removed, it might be proper to type the Army Commander's Christmas Greetings on the reverse side. This would please the recipient, and anything that pleased the men I knew would please him. "To each officer and soldier in the Third United States Army, I wish a Merry Christmas. I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty, and skill in battle. We march in our might to complete victory. May God's blessings rest upon each of you on this Christmas Day. G.S. Patton, Jr., Lieutenant General, Commanding, Third United States Army."

This done, I donned my heavy trench coat, crossed the quadrangle of the old French military barracks, and reported to General Patton. He read the prayer copy, returned it to me with a very casual directive, "Have 250,000 copies printed and see to it that every man in the Third Army gets one." The size of the order amazed me; this was certainly doing something about the weather in a big way. But I said nothing but the usual, "Very well, sir!" Recovering, I invited his attention to the reverse side containing the Christmas Greeting, with his name and rank typed. "Very good," he said, with a smile of approval. "If the General would sign the card, it would add a personal touch that I am sure the men would like." He took his place at his desk, signed the card, returned it to me and then said: "Chaplain, sit down for a moment; I want to talk to you about this business of prayer." He rubbed his face in his hands, was silent for a moment, then rose and walked over to the high window, and stood there with his back toward me as he looked out on the falling rain. As usual, he was dressed stunningly, and his six-foot-two powerfully built physique made an unforgettable silhouette against the great window. The General Patton I saw there was the Army Commander to whom the welfare of the men under him was a matter of personal responsibility. Even in the heat of combat he could take time out to direct new methods to prevent trench feet, to see to it that dry socks went forward daily with the rations to troops on the line, to kneel in the mud administering morphine and caring for a wounded soldier until the ambulance came. What was coming now?

"Chaplain, how much praying is being done in the Third Army?" was his ques-

tion. I parried: "Does the General mean by chaplains, or by the men?" "By everybody," he replied. To this I countered: "I am afraid to admit it, but I do not believe that much praying is going on. When there is fighting, everyone prays, but now with this constant rain — when things are quiet, dangerously quiet, men just sit and wait for things to happen. Prayer out here is difficult. Both chaplains and men are removed from a special building with a steeple. Prayer to most of them is a formal, ritualized affair, involving special posture and a liturgical setting. I do not believe that much praying is being done."

Patton's Perspective

The General left the window, and again seated himself at his desk, leaned back in his swivel chair, toying with a long lead pencil between his index fingers.

Chaplain, I am a strong believer in prayer. There are three ways that men get what they want: by planning, by working, and by praying. Any great military operation takes careful planning, or thinking. Then you must have well-trained troops to carry it out: that's working. But between the plan and the operation there is always an unknown. That unknown spells defeat or victory, success or failure. It is the reaction of the actors to the ordeal when it actually comes. Some people call that getting the breaks; I call it God. God has His part, or margin in everything. That's where prayer comes in. Up to now, in the Third Army, God

has been very good to us. We have never retreated; we have suffered no defeats, no famine, no epidemics. This is because a lot of people back home are praying for us. We were lucky in Africa, in Sicily, and in Italy, simply because people prayed. But we have to pray for ourselves, too. A good soldier is not made merely by making him think and work. There is something in every soldier that goes deeper than thinking or working — it's his "guts." It is something that he has built in there: it is a world of truth and power that is higher than himself. Great living is not all output of thought and work. A man has to have intake as well. I don't know what you call it, but I call it Religion, Prayer, or God.

He talked about Gideon in the Bible, said that men should pray no matter where they were, in church or out of it; that if they did not pray, sooner or later they would "crack up." To all this I commented agreement: that one of the major training objectives of my office was to help soldiers recover and make their lives effective in this third realm, prayer. It would do no harm to re-impress this training on chaplains. We had about 486 chaplains in the Third Army at that time, representing 32 denominations. Once the Third Army had become opera-

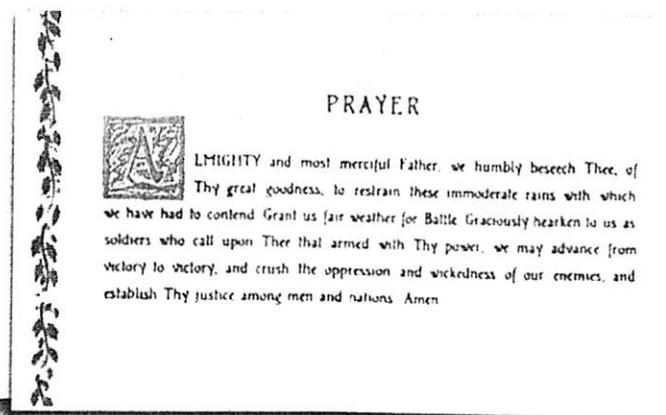
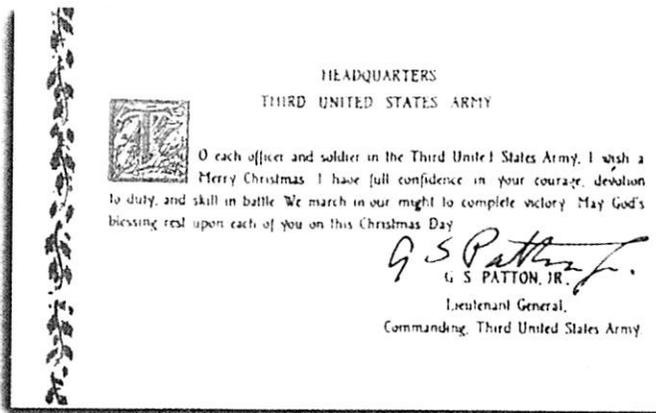
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tional, my mode of contact with the chaplains had been chiefly through Training Letters issued from time to time to the Chaplains in the four corps and the 22 to 26 divisions comprising the Third Army. Each treated of a variety of subjects of corrective or training value to a chaplain working with troops in the field.

[Patton continued:]

I wish you would put out a Training Letter on this subject of Prayer to all the chaplains: write about nothing else, just the importance of prayer. Let me see it before you send it. We've got to get not only the chaplains but every man in the Third Army to pray. We must ask God to stop these rains. These rains are that margin that holds defeat or victory. If we all pray, it will be like what Dr. Carrel said (the allusion was to a press quote some days previously when Dr. Alexis Carrel, one of the foremost scientists, described prayer "as one of the most powerful forms of energy



Summoning the power of prayer: As directed by General Patton, Father O'Neill, chief chaplain of the Third U.S. Army, printed 250,000 cards containing a prayer for relief from "immoderate rains"; the reverse of each card contained a Christmas greeting from the general. Patton instructed that a copy be sent to each man in his army: "We've got to get not only the chaplains but every man in the Third Army to pray."

“We must ask God to stop these rains. These rains are that margin that holds defeat or victory. If we all pray ... it will be like plugging in on a current whose source is in Heaven. I believe that prayer completes that circuit. It is power.”

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man can generate”), it will be like plugging in on a current whose source is in Heaven. I believe that prayer completes that circuit. It is power.

The Importance of Prayer

With that the General arose from his chair, a sign that the interview was ended. I returned to my field desk, typed Training Letter No. 5 while the “copy” was “hot,” touching on some or all of the General’s reverie on Prayer, and after staff processing, presented it to General Patton on the next day. The General read it, and without change directed that it be circulated not only to the 486 chaplains, but to every organization commander down to and including the regimental level. Three thousand two hundred copies were distributed to every unit in the Third Army over my signature as Third Army Chaplain. Strictly speaking, it was the Army Commander’s letter, not mine. Due to the fact that the order came directly from General Patton, distribution was completed on December 11 and 12 in advance of its date line, December 14, 1944. Titled “Training Letter No. 5,” with the salutary “Chaplains of the Third Army,” the letter continued: “At this stage of the operations I would call upon the chaplains and the men of the Third United States Army to focus their attention on the importance of prayer.

“Our glorious march from the Normandy Beach across France to where we stand, before and beyond the Siegfried Line, with the wreckage of the German Army behind us, should convince the most skeptical soldier that God has ridden with our banner. Pestilence and famine have not touched us. We have continued in unity of purpose. We have had no quitters, and our leadership has been masterful. The Third Army has no roster of Retreats. None of

Defeats. We have no memory of a lost battle to hand on to our children from this great campaign.

“But we are not stopping at the Siegfried Line. Tough days may be ahead of us before we eat our rations in the Chancellory of the Deutsches Reich.

“As chaplains it is our business to pray. We preach its importance. We urge its

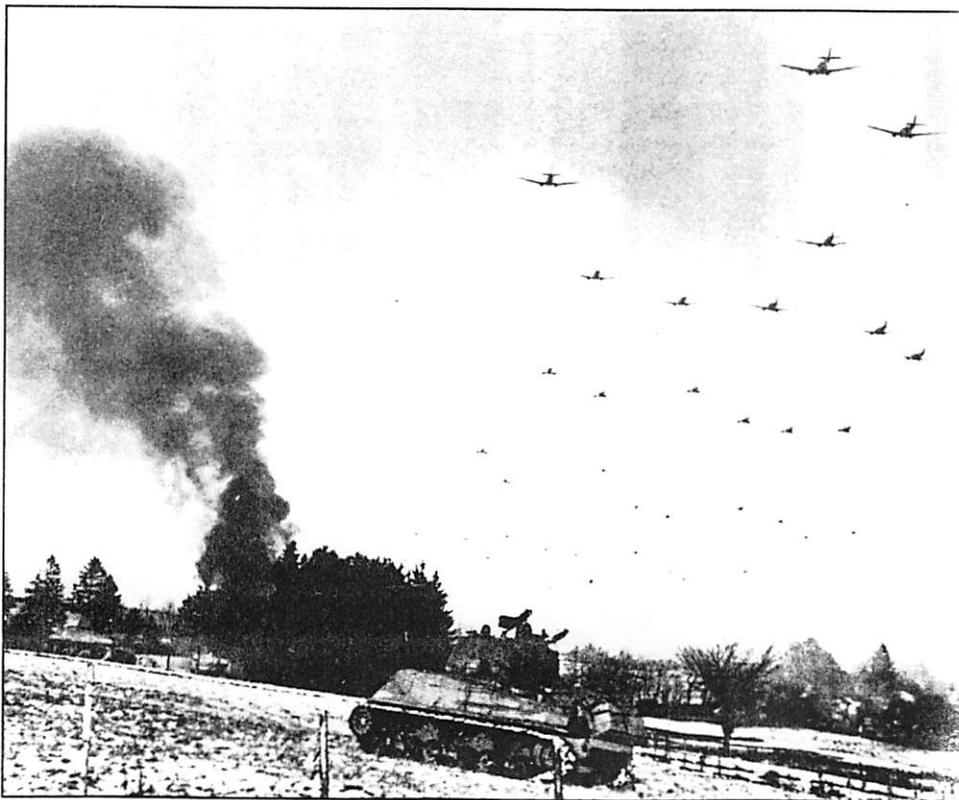
practice. But the time is now to intensify our faith in prayer, not alone with ourselves, but with every believing man, Protestant, Catholic, Jew, or Christian, in the ranks of the Third United States Army.

“Those who pray do more for the world than those who fight; and if the world goes from bad to worse, it is because there are more battles than prayers. ‘Hands lifted up,’ said Bossuet, ‘smash more battalions than hands that strike.’ Gideon of Bible fame was least in his father’s house. He came from Israel’s smallest tribe. But he

was a mighty man of valor. His strength lay not in his military might, but in his recognition of God’s proper claims upon his life. He reduced his Army from thirty-two thousand to three hundred men lest the people of Israel would think that their valor had saved them. We have no intention to reduce our vast striking force. But we must urge, instruct, and indoctrinate every fighting man to pray as well as fight. In Gideon’s day, and in our own, spiritually alert minorities carry the burdens and bring the victories.

“Urge all of your men to pray, not alone in church, but everywhere. Pray when driving. Pray when fighting. Pray alone. Pray with others. Pray by night and pray by day. Pray for the cessation of immoderate rains, for good weather for Battle. Pray for the defeat of our wicked enemy whose banner is injustice and whose god is oppression. Pray for Victory. Pray for our Army, and Pray for peace.

“We must march together, all out for God. The soldier who ‘cracks up’ does not need sympathy or comfort as much as he



He stills the storms, again: On December 20, 1944 — following several days of concerted prayer by the Third Army — the rains ceased and the fogs dissipated, surprising both the Nazis and the American forecasters. The providential onset of perfect flying weather allowed U.S. air power to support the American counterattack.

needs strength. We are not trying to make the best of these days. It is our job to make the most of them. Now is not the time to follow God from 'afar off.' This Army needs the assurance and the faith that God is with us. With prayer, we cannot fail.

"Be assured that this message on prayer has the approval, the encouragement, and the enthusiastic support of the Third United States Army Commander.

"With every good wish to each of you for a very Happy Christmas, and my personal congratulations for your splendid and courageous work since landing on the beach, I am," etc., etc., signed The Third Army Commander.

Miraculous Answer

The timing of the Prayer story is important: let us rearrange the dates: the "Prayer Conference" with General Patton was 8 December; the 664th Engineer Topographical Company, at the order of Colonel David H. Tulley, C.E., Assistant to the Third Army Engineer, working night and day reproduced 250,000 copies of the Prayer Card: the Adjutant General, Colonel Robert S. Cummings, supervised the distribution of both the Prayer Cards and Training Letter No. 5 to reach the troops by December 12-14; the breakthrough was on December 16 in the First Army Zone when the Germans crept out of the Schnee Eifel Forest in the midst of heavy rains, thick fogs, and swirling ground mists that muffled sound, blotted out the sun, and reduced visibility to a few yards. The few divisions on the Luxembourg frontier were surprised and brushed aside. They found it hard to fight an enemy they could neither see nor hear. For three days it looked to the jubilant Nazis as if their desperate gamble would succeed. They had achieved complete surprise. Their Sixth Panzer Army, rejuvenated in secret after its debacle in France, seared through the Ardennes like a hot knife through butter. The First Army's VIII Corps was holding this area with three infantry divisions (one of them new and in the line only a few days) thinly disposed over an 88-mile front and with one armored division far to the rear, in reserve. The VIII Corps had been in the sector for months. It was considered a semirest area and outside of a little patrolling was wholly an inactive position.

When the blow struck the VIII Corps



Man of war — man of faith: Often caricatured as intoxicated with warfare, George S. Patton was a man of broad learning and deep faith. A veteran of the Third Army pointed out, "No man served under Patton; he was always serving with us." At his request, General Patton was buried in Luxembourg, among the mortal remains of his men who died during the Battle of the Bulge.

fought with imperishable heroism. The Germans were slowed down but the Corps was too shattered to stop them with its remnants. Meanwhile, to the north, the Fifth Panzer Army was slugging through another powerful prong along the vulnerable boundary between the VIII and VI Corps. Had the bad weather continued there is no telling how far the Germans might have advanced. On the 19th of December, the Third Army turned from East to North to meet the attack. As General Patton rushed his divisions north from the Saar Valley to the relief of the beleaguered Bastogne, the prayer was answered. On December 20, to the consternation of the Germans and the delight of the American forecasters who were equally surprised at the turn-about — the rains and the fogs ceased. For the better part of a week came bright clear skies and perfect flying weath-

er. Our planes came over by tens, hundreds, and thousands. They knocked out hundreds of tanks, killed thousands of enemy troops in the Bastogne salient, and harried the enemy as he valiantly tried to bring up reinforcements. The 101st Airborne, with the 4th, 9th, and 10th Armored Divisions, which saved Bastogne, and other divisions which assisted so valiantly in driving the Germans home, will testify to the great support rendered by our air forces. General Patton prayed for fair weather for battle. He got it.

It was late in January of 1945 when I saw the Army Commander again. This was in the city of Luxembourg. He stood directly in front of me, smiled: "Well, Padre, our prayers worked. I knew they would." Then he cracked me on the side of my steel helmet with his riding crop. That was his way of saying, "Well done." ■