



Patton had planned to hunt on the day of his accident. He is seen here hunting birds with then-Brigadier General Robert Grow.

The End of the Ride:

An Eyewitness Account of George S. Patton's Fatal Accident

by Denver Fugate

It was a cold morning that second Sunday in December when Horace L. Woodring was roused from his quarters at 15th Army Headquarters, located at Bad Nauheim, not knowing that day his name would be etched in history.

Woodring, a 19-year-old private first class, was the chauffeur for General George S. Patton. The general had decided to go pheasant hunting in the vicinity of Mannheim on his last day in Germany.

The events that followed would make world headlines. The *New York Times* reported that Patton was seriously injured when his limousine hit an Army truck. With him was General Hobart Gay, his long-time chief of staff. General Gay and PFC Woodring were shaken up but not injured.

The morning of December 9, 1945, is one that "Woody" Woodring remembers well. In recent interviews with this writer, Woodring related his often-told account of the accident: "I was called out of bed and instructed to prepare the limousine for a hunting trip. Sergeant Joseph Spruce — with the guns and hunting dog — started out ahead of us in a jeep." Along the way, Woodring said, "The General wanted to check out a castle. He was leaving the next day to go home, so he wanted to make sure he saw this particular castle." In his diary, General Gay identified the castle as the Roman ruins located in Saalburg, near Bad Homburg. Woodring continued, "The General looked the castle over,

and when he returned to the car, he got in the front seat with me, where the heater was, to dry his boots, which were wet from tramping around the snow-covered ruins. We stopped at the checkpoint north of Mannheim, where Sergeant Spruce was waiting. The dog was about to freeze, so it was put in the car with us. The General climbed out of the front seat into the back seat.

"The hunting party continued on route 38 toward Mannheim, through

Kaefertal, passing a Polish displaced persons camp where Benjamin Franklin Village is now located. When we came to a railroad crossing, Sergeant Spruce got through, but the train caught us.

"After the train passed, there was no one in front of us or behind us; the only vehicle in sight was an Army truck moving in my direction.

"At that point, General Patton remarked: 'Look at all the derelict vehi-



The passenger compartment of Patton's Cadillac remained intact and no glass was broken in the accident that ultimately resulted in the death of the WWII hero. Neither the driver nor another passenger were hurt, but Patton's head struck the limousine's interior partition.

cles,' which were parked along both sides of the road. 'How awful war is; think of the waste.'"

Woodring was still eyeing the oncoming truck. "Approximately a quarter-mile from the railroad crossing, the truck — driven by Technical Sergeant Robert L. Thompson — suddenly turned left into the driveway entrance of a quartermaster unit."

The two vehicles collided at nearly a 90-degree angle. The right bumper of the big truck struck the right side of General Patton's Cadillac, smashing the radiator and the right fender. None of the windows were broken.

After a time, the Cadillac was repaired and returned to service. Today, it is on display at the Patton Museum at Fort Knox. The truck was not damaged. According to research by author Ladislav Farago, Thompson had been out joyriding after a night of drinking with some of his buddies and had no business nor authority being on the road that Sunday morning. There were three soldiers in the cab, an additional infraction of regulations. What later helped fuel conspiracy theories was that Thompson, according to Farago, was allowed to vanish to become the mystery man of the incident.

Gay, Woodring, and Thompson were shaken up a bit, but were otherwise unhurt. General Patton, riding on the right side of the front portion of the back seat, was thrown forward forcefully and then hurled back. His face had smashed into the upper part of the partition that separated the driver from the rear compartment. The impact broke his nose and his neck and split his scalp open. He was bleeding from wounds of the forehead and scalp.

"The first thing I saw," Woodring remembers, "Was the skull through the open wound, and he was lying over General Gay."

"His head was to the left and I was practically supporting him on my right shoulder in a semi-upright position," Gay remembers.

"I got out of the car and opened the back door and helped General Gay to get out from under General Patton, and then laid him down gently," recalls Woodring. "Help was quick to arrive. The first vehicle on the scene was an Army ambulance, which just happened to be passing by... An Army sergeant medic proceeded to stop the bleeding and patch the General up, and I proceeded to direct traffic. By this time,

others began to arrive. Military policemen came on the scene and a colonel arrived, who was a doctor. General Patton was placed on a stretcher and transferred to an ambulance."

That was the last time Woodring saw Patton alive. Although there was a military hospital in Mannheim, the apparent seriousness of Patton's injury led to the decision to transport him, with a military escort, to the more adequately equipped 130th U.S. Army Station Hospital in Heidelberg. Patton was conscious all the way to the hospital, although his condition was serious. He was paralyzed from the neck down, and his spine had been broken at the third cervical vertebra. The fourth cervical vertebra was dislocated.

The front of the Patton limousine was smashed in, yet it still appeared to be a minor accident. When the military police learned that neither vehicle was exceeding the speed limit, they placed no charges against Woodring or Thompson. Thompson's truck had been moving at 10 miles per hour, and estimates had Patton's Cadillac traveling at approximately 30 miles per hour. Both drivers were absolved of any fault, although Gay and Woodring stated that Thompson had never signaled his intentions to turn left. The official conclusion was that, although preventable, the accident had just happened.

Woodring was further absolved of any blame when General Patton directed that Woodring drive Mrs. Patton from the airport to the hospital upon her arrival in Germany. According to Robert Patton, the General's grandson, "It was the best way to assure the man that Patton didn't blame him for what happened." But Woodring would never again chauffeur his idol over the war-torn roads of Europe. The dream of a lifetime had only lasted about four months.

Woodring became General Patton's driver as the result of Patton's transfer from Third Army to Fifteenth Army, a paper army assigned the mission of recording the history of the European war. His new chauffeur came with glowing recommendations, and his life thus far had seemed to be wrapped up in automobiles and driving. A 19-year-old kid from Union County, Kentucky, Woodring tells of his employment at age 15 by a trucking company hauling coal and gravel. He admits it was necessary to adjust his birth date. After enlisting in the Army in 1944, he com-

pleted basic training and then attended chauffeur school at Fort McClellan, Alabama. After arriving in Europe, Woodring's assignment was to an infantry unit, but he suffered frostbitten feet and was hospitalized, then later transferred to the motor pool. He eventually became the chauffeur for General Leonard T. Gerow, who commanded Fifteenth Army. When General Patton replaced Gerow, his new driver appealed to him. Woodring was a dashing young fellow, a smart dresser, an eager beaver at everything he did, and not overawed by the biggest of brass. Patton boasted that Woodring was better than a Piper Cub to get you there ahead of time. He was referring to a recent trip they had made to Leige, Belgium, some 150 miles in less than two hours. Shortly before the end of their last ride together, and despite the propensity of both Patton and Woodring for high-speed driving, Patton commented on Woodring's sense of caring about the car he drove. Minor car trouble had resulted in two stops during their trip south. "This is a very careful driver," Patton noted to Gay, "He seems to sense when there is something wrong with the car."

The accident was reported worldwide. Woodring recalls being given permission to talk to the press the day after the accident. "I gave the story that day and never saw it in print the way I told it. The story was always changed around," he said.

Unfortunately, Patton's accident was poorly documented at the time and remains so to this day, although later investigations have clarified certain previously vague details.

For example, *After The Battle Magazine* investigated the accident and photographed the scene in 1975. The exact site of the accident was in front of the present-day Mannheim Sanitation Department on Kaefertaler Strasse, a few hundred yards from the city limits of Kaefertal, a suburb of Mannheim. At that point, the street's name changes to Mannheimer Strasse. In about 1960, the level crossing over the railroad tracks on Kaefertaler Strasse was removed and the track fenced in when Bundesstrasse 38 was diverted west over an overpass about 300 yards away. So today, it is impossible to drive across the tracks following General Patton's route of December 9, 1945. However, after driving the diversion, if one continues along Kaefertaler Strasse on the far side of the railway line, some of the open spaces where the



Pallbearers carry Patton's body from a villa in Heidelberg prior to the funeral at Christ Church Cathedral.

derelict vehicles were heaped still remain.

As with the demise of other public figures, Patton's accident and subsequent death have spawned a myriad of myths, gossip, speculation, outright fabrication, and conspiracy theories. A film, *Brass Target*, and a novel, *The Algonquin Project*, both hypothesize that the accident was in fact a well-planned assassination. But both Gay and Woodring dispute any conspiracy theory. In 1978, MGM hired Woodring to promote the movie through a nationwide television tour, which included eight television shows, 13 radio shows, and several newspaper luncheons. Woodring, who traveled with Frederick Nolan, the author of *Algonquin Project*, recalls:

"He's one of those authors who sees a conspiracy under every stone. I was along to correct this. He would say Patton was assassinated, and that the truck pulled in front deliberately, and I would contradict him," said Woodring. From his home in El Paso, Texas, General Gay wrote Woodring: "You were great on TV concerning Patton's death. Of course, it was purely accidental. In fact, as you know, the trip was not planned until late that morning."

Those who suggest Patton was somehow murdered have failed to provide the slightest evidence of how anyone could have planned such a caper or ensured that Patton's Cadillac would be momentarily stopped for the passage of a train at the crossing just down the street from the scene of the accident. It was a freak accident, since neither

Woodring nor the other passenger in the car, General Gay, were injured. Moreover, Gay and Patton were both in the back seat. But the conspiracy theories persisted. In 1987, a former soldier asserted that he was first on the scene of the accident, alleged to have occurred not in Mannheim-Kaefertal, but near Heidelberg, only a few scant miles from the hospital where Patton was taken, and that Eisenhower had shaken his hand at the funeral and commended him. But Eisenhower had returned to the U.S. and did not return to Germany to attend the funeral. Yet another theorist has ludicrously proclaimed that he was hired by the head of the Office of Strategic Service (OSS), William J. Donovan, to assassinate Patton, but that someone else did the job using a specially designed weapon that fired a piece of metal, making his injuries appear to have been caused by the accident. When Patton did not die, the assassin allegedly finished the job by slipping into the hospital and administering cyanide. The Army's perfunctory investigation and its failure to hold a full-scale formal inquiry opened the door to those who saw profit in conspiracies, lies, and half-truths.

The failure to thoroughly investigate the accident was incomprehensible and inexcusable. However, General Patton received the best available care. The Heidelberg hospital staff had been alerted, and when General Patton arrived, the chief of surgery, LTC Paul S. Hill, quickly dressed and sutured the head wound, then began a detailed examination, including X-rays. These

confirmed his worst fear — Patton was paralyzed.

In the 12 days before his death, Patton was treated by some 14 physicians of varying specialties. Up to the afternoon of December 19, Patton had made what the bulletins described as very satisfactory progress. But then his condition began to deteriorate. The doctors did their best to halt the gradual deterioration caused by an embolism, but it became increasingly obvious that the General was facing his final battle. General Patton died while sleeping at 1750 December 21. Funeral services were held in Christ Church in Heidelberg on December 23.

Woodring, still in shock, was among the many mourners. The burial took place on Christmas Eve just outside Luxembourg City, at Hamm, where General Patton was laid to rest alongside the remains of 5,075 other Americans who had served under his command.

General Patton had asked Woodring to be his civilian chauffeur when he got out of the service. It was thought that the General would remain in uniform for one more year, so Woodring, nearing the end of his enlistment, extended his term for one more year, having accepted the job as civilian chauffer. The General had been attempting to promote Woodring, but at that time all ratings were frozen. Patton died before the restriction was lifted. Following a furlough home in January 1946, Woodring returned to Germany to complete his final year in the Army with an assignment to an artillery battalion in the 9th Division, located in Augsburg. Not surprisingly, he became the commander's driver.

Woodring finally got home to Kentucky in January 1947, where he pursued another dream — selling cars. Now 69, Woodring is an unassuming, outgoing, and successful consultant for auto dealers in the Detroit area. He married his hometown sweetheart in 1948, and they have three children and grandchildren. He plays golf in the summer and enjoys snowmobiling in the winter. When asked on the eve of the 50th anniversary of that fateful accident about how it affected his life, he freely stated that it has had no adverse effect. In fact, he has fond memories of being on the road every day with Gen-

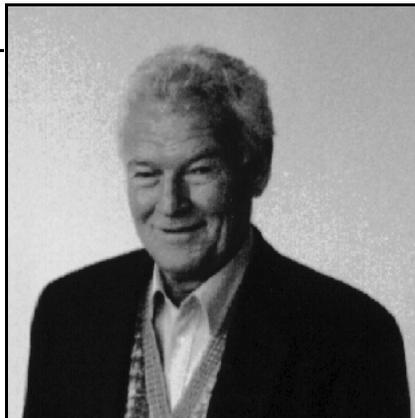
eral Patton, constantly on the move, almost always without an MP escort.

"He was my idol. Driving for him was the dream of a lifetime," Woodring says.

Along with the good memories, only one memento remains, and that is the four-star flag from the General's car. Woodring had also brought home the famous air horns from the fender of the Cadillac, but they were later destroyed in a fire. Perhaps the depth of respect that Woodring had for his idol is best measured in the fact that he named his only son John Patton Woodring.

Originally, I sought to tell the definitive story surrounding the Patton accident. But a maze of contradictions eliminates the possibility of a definitive ending. There is still widespread disagreement about many of the details of the Patton accident and subsequent death 50 years after the fact. The broader facts of an historical event are easier to pin down than verifying the smaller details because the human memory is faulty. As an example, military policemen had flocked to the accident scene, among them Lieutenant Joseph Shanahan, the 3rd Army Deputy Provost Marshal charged with reorganization of the Mannheim police. According to Shanahan, there was never an official report of the accident because, as he put it, the nature of the crash did not warrant one. By the time the MPs got there, there was nothing to report. They considered it a trivial accident at the time.

Others at the scene included Lieutenant Peter K. Babalas, assigned to the 818th Military Police in Mannheim, which had jurisdiction at the scene. Babalas knew the accident was trivial, to be sure, but that General Patton's injury was not. He allegedly made an investigation of the mishap, concluding that both drivers of the vehicles had been guilty of careless driving. Moreover, Babalas could not recall that Lt. Shanahan was present at the scene of the accident. In 1971, on two separate occasions, Babalas requested from the Department of the Army a copy of the report he had submitted at the time of the investigation. After some delay, he received a reply that the report of investigation could not be found. After his extensive research, Farago would write that all we still have about the probe is a deposition by Woodring. When asked who investigated the accident, Woodring's adamant reply was, "Lieutenant Van Landingham and Lieu-



Horace L. Woodring today

tenant Smith. There was very little interviewing done at the scene. Lt. Babalas was not around. I can't imagine how many times I've told the story, but it seems everybody else had their own version." Perhaps the most official document corroborating what Woodring reported is a letter dated January 7, 1946, from Headquarters Company, 15th U.S. Army, which certified that "PFC Horace L. Woodring ASN 35820385, who was driving for General George Patton, Commanding General of the 15th U.S. Army at the time of the General's fateful accident on the 9th day of December 1945, was in no way responsible for the accident. All reports appearing in publication here on the continent and in the U.S. stated that PFC Woodring shared in the responsibility for the accident. This is absolutely contrary to the findings of the official accident reports. PFC Woodring was cleared completely of any responsibility by the official accident report which was prepared by the commanding officer of the 818th MP Battalion, located in Mannheim, Germany. Furthermore, it might be added that PFC Woodring was cleared verbally by both General Patton and General Gay, occupants of the car, at the scene of the accident. Reference may be made also to General Gay's personal diary, where he has made a certified statement which relieves PFC Woodring of all responsibility. PFC Woodring was at all times a very competent and efficient driver and I personally feel that this incident in no way should be considered a blur on his character or dependability." The letter was signed Lynn P. Smith 1st Lt., Infantry Motor Officer.

There is no question that some of these men were at the accident scene at one time or the other, but questions linger as to what their roles were, and whether their memories were consistent with facts.

Horace L Woodring is now the lone survivor of the Patton accident. General Gay continued to serve and retired from the Army. He later successfully pursued a civilian career, and died August 20, 1963. The truck driver, Robert L. Thompson, returned home like thousands of other ex-soldiers to get his life in order. Sadly, he agonized for the remainder of his life over the guilt he accepted for the unfortunate collision. Thompson's widow, in a recent phone conversation, said: "He said he always felt like a murderer." Thompson died in June, 1994. For nearly half a century, Woodring has consistently repeated his eyewitness account of the events of that December morning from the beginning of the journey at Bad Nauheim to Mannheim, the end of the ride.

Sources

- Allen, Robert S., *Lucky Forward; the History of Patton's Third US Army*, The Vanguard Press, N.Y., 1947.
- After The Battle*, Vol. 17, 1975.
- Blumenson, Martin, *The Patton Papers 1940-1945*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1974.
- D'Este, Carlo W.A., *Genius For War: The Life of George S. Patton Jr.*, Harper Collins, 1995.
- D'Agostino, Janet, "Patton: Death Throes of a General," *Stars and Stripes*, December 20, 1989.
- Farago, Ladislav, *Ordeal and Triumph*, Ivan Oblensky, Inc. N.Y., 1962.
- The Last Days of Patton*, MC Graw Hill, N.Y., 1981.
- Gay, Hobart R., *Diary*.
- Hill, Paul S., Letter, October 21, 1964.
- Laughlin, Robert E., "Patton: A Soldier's Final Days," *EURARMY*, December 1982.
- Monsour, Paul, "Brass Target: Fiction or Fact," *The Union County Advocate*, December 20, 1978.
- Patton, Robert H., *The Pattons*, Crown Publishers, N.Y., 1994.
- Smith, Lynn P., Letter, December 9, 1945.
- Woodring Horace L., Personal Interviews, March 20, 1995 and May 11, 1995.
- Whiting, Charles, *Patton's Last Battle*, Stein and Day, N.Y., 1987.

Before his recent retirement, Denver Fugate was an Associate Professor of History at Elizabethtown Community College, Elizabethtown, Ky. He taught American History, Kentucky History, and American Government.