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Patton, George Smith

By [Christopher Michael Redgraves](#)

Patton, *George Smith*

United States Army officer and Commander of the 304th Tank Brigade who participated in the Battle of St. Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.

Born 11 November 1885 in San Gabriel, California

Died 21 December 1945 in Heidelberg, Germany

George Smith Patton was an American military leader. He began his career as a cavalry officer and later helped introduce tanks into the American army. His importance to the First World War was the way he trained the 304th Tank Brigade. He also commanded American tanks during the battle of St. Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.

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1917

George S. Patton (1885-1945) graduated from West Point in early 1909 and became a cavalry officer. He served with the American expedition into Mexico during 1916 and 1917 prior to embarking for Europe as an *aide-de-camp* to General [John J. Pershing \(1860-1948\)](#). Patton sought opportunities to observe British and French tank manufacturing and training. Colonel [Fox Conner \(1874-1951\)](#) influenced his thinking on the future of [tanks and warfare](#). Afterward, Patton began petitioning for authorization to establish an American tank school.

Establishment of a Tank Army

In mid-December 1917 Patton received permission from the United States Army to open a tank school in Bourg, France. The curriculum included drills on military discipline and tactics. Patton chose the French Renault FT-17 as a training tank due to its mobility, preferring that his tanks move quickly over the battlefield like [cavalry](#). This would also be the tank that Patton and his troops used in battle. Patton applied lessons from the cavalry to tanks and their mobility. Patton felt that tanks were meant to move as an independent force to cause breakthroughs and disrupt the enemy's ability to fight. However, the army felt that tanks were best used as [infantry](#) support, moving ahead with the infantry and acting as their protection from German strong points. Patton continued to hope tanks would become an independent branch of the army. On 20 August 1918 Patton was placed in command of the 304th Tank Brigade by the U.S. Army.

Combat

During the Battle of St. Mihiel (12–15 September 1918), Patton's orders were to send his tanks forward, while he stayed behind in the American trenches. Patton disobeyed this particular order and advanced with his tanks towards their objectives. The main goal of the American tanks was to advance with the infantry. In this way the tanks would protect the infantry as well as destroy any resistance from German strong points. Following an expected breakthrough, the combined forces were to push on towards the town of Pannes. American tanks were ordered forward early in the morning. The infantry were sent up shortly after the relatively slow tanks had made their initial progress. Once in contact with German forces tanks were ordered to clear trenches and [machine gun](#) nest using their machine guns and cannons. As the tanks removed the more difficult pockets of resistance, the infantry moved forward and cleaned up the remaining defenses. In this way tanks and infantry supported each other as the whole American force moved forward. Patton's tanks pushed through the town of Essey and stalled outside of Pannes, due to lack of fuel. Patton led four functional tanks into Pannes to close out the first day of the battle. Patton's tanks did exceptionally well for their first time in combat. However, the majority of the tanks left the battle because of mechanical failures or a lack of fuel.

One of the lessons Patton took from the battle was that infantry was unable to support a tank advance. Often Patton had to push infantry forces to keep up with his tanks. This reinforced Patton's belief that tanks were destined to be their own branch of the army, not simply infantry support. For Patton the most important lesson of the Battle of St. Mihiel was that tanks required their own logistical support. The fact that most of the tanks ran out of fuel showed Patton that in the future the army needed to use more care giving tanks what they needed to reach their objectives.

On the opening day of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive (26 September-11 November 1918), Patton again led from the front. When the infantry stalled outside of Cheppy, Patton took command and led them forward. During the advance Patton was shot by a German machine gun and was taken from the front. Patton finished the war in the hospital. Days before the armistice Patton stole a car and attempted to return to the front lines; he was too late to see any more fighting.

Post-war

Following the war Patton became the champion of tanks in the [United States](#). During World War II Patton would become one of the most famous American generals, due to his victories with tanks in North Africa and Sicily and at the Battle of the Bulge. Throughout his career Patton pushed for a heavier emphasis on tanks within the Army. His lessons from World War I had shown him that, when properly used, tanks were capable of causing breakthroughs that could be exploited by infantry sent to hold captured ground. Patton would use tanks, during the Second World War, in a *Blitzkrieg* style, quickly smashing through enemy lines in an attempt to disrupt his opponents and allow the infantry to follow. Patton continued to struggle with logistics. While he constantly pushed the army to supply his tanks with more fuel and ammunition, Patton was often disappointed with the support he was given. Several times during the Second World War Patton found his tanks running on little fuel and barely able to advance. The most notable failure of logistics came during Patton's advance through Lorraine in August of 1944, when his tanks completely ran out of fuel and were forced to await resupply.

Christopher Michael Redgraves, University of North Texas

Section Editor: [Lon Strauss](#)

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