

FOUR

The Olympian

TWO YEARS LATER, in the summer of 1912, Patton found himself back in Europe as an Olympian. In Stockholm, Sweden, he competed for the United States in the fifth olympiad of the modern era. This was a coup on two counts. It showed how fit, athletic, and daring Patton was; but it also showed how politically adept he could be, especially for a man of such legendary self-destructive tendencies when it came to being rash and impulsive. When he wanted to—and as a young officer he badly wanted to—he knew how to ingratiate himself with the powerful who could advance his career.

He never hesitated to exploit family connections and influence when it came to advancing his career, and he was severely disappointed that his father failed by a narrow margin to secure

the Democratic nomination to run for senator from California in 1910. Had Patton Sr. secured the senate seat, as a ranking member of Congress's upper chamber he could then have done much to advance his son's military career, as Lieutenant Patton was only too aware.

When Patton returned to Fort Sheridan after his honeymoon in England, he applied himself as diligently as ever and carefully calculated his next move. He also laid the groundwork for it with aplomb. He taught himself to use the typewriter and threw himself headlong into reading and writing. Throughout his career he published many interesting articles on military strategy, tactics, and technological developments. He also formed a habit of writing intelligent memos to his superiors on possible policy improvements in regard to training and technology. Beatrice helped him enormously in this regard, always translating articles in French and helping him to polish his English.

Patton was very aware he had acquitted himself well at Fort Sheridan under Captain Marshall, and he set a new goal of being assigned to Fort Myer, located across the Potomac from Washington DC, next to Arlington National Cemetery. As a Virginian, Patton knew the cemetery sat on ground once belonging to Robert E. Lee's Arlington estate.. Even before Lee owned the land it had belonged to George Washington, who bequeathed it to his stepson, whose granddaughter Lee had married. No facet of Fort Myer's prestige escaped Patton's notice.

Fort Myer was the foremost army showplace, a plumb assignment that would bring Patton into close contact with high-ranking military and political leaders. He deftly used a family connection to

pull off his scheme to be assigned there. Major Willie Horton was courting Beatrice's younger sister Kay at the time, and Horton had influence that he brought to bear to have Patton assigned to the 15th Cavalry in the late autumn of 1911. When Patton reported there a few weeks later on December 3, he had the platform from which to launch his rise to high rank and fame.



Fort Myer was famous for its equestrian excellence. Whenever ceremonial occasions in the nation's capital called for mounted cavalry, Fort Myer filled the bill. This held true for official state receptions for foreign dignitaries and for elaborate funerals for high-ranking government and military personages. The fort was also home to equestrian drills and shows, and it fielded the best polo team in the army—one of the best teams in the entire East. The Army Chief of Staff and his team were headquartered there, as well as other upper echelon army personnel. On one early morning ride, Patton met Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, who enjoyed a daily ride as well. The two hit it off and became lifelong friends; this friendship would prove crucial for Patton's survival when he later became embroiled in one of the catastrophic miscues—the slapping incidents in Sicily in 1943—that threatened his career.

Patton had not been at Fort Myer long when he was summoned for an interview. His running prowess at West Point had not been for naught. The modern Olympics was to include an event for military officers, the revived Pentathlon. The modern version of this ancient five-part event would include a shooting contest

with pistols on a 25-meter range; a swimming race of 300 meters; a 4,000-meter foot race; a fencing tournament; and a 5,000-meter steeplechase. Army officials knew of Patton's record-setting efforts as a track star at West Point and his having been a good fencer there as well. Obviously as a cavalry officer he could handle a horse; his marksmanship was a matter of record on his West Point transcripts; and he swam well as a cadet to boot, the result of all the swimming he had done in his teens at Catalina Island.

The army brass chose Patton to represent them in Stockholm. With his usual zeal he threw himself into training and was, according to his family, so maniacal about it that he was difficult to be around. He also went on a diet and eschewed alcohol and tobacco. In those days the Olympics had not become the large international event the games evolved into. There were no national tryouts held a year in advance. Likely prospects were simply recruited to perform, as Patton had been, and prospects had only a little more than two months to prepare.

Patton was physically fit, relatively speaking, but he was not in training for such rigorously contested events. Nevertheless he hurled himself into training and went at it dawn to dusk—running, swimming, shooting, and fencing. On the way over to Europe on the steamship *Finland*, Beatrice, his parents, Aunt Nannie, and his sister Nita accompanied him. He trained on board every day, running two miles on deck at dawn with the cross-country team and swimming in an improvised 20-by-8-foot canvas tank on the fantail. While he swam in place in this tank he was tethered to a rope that bit into his sides and left chafed runnels in his flesh.

For months he had been eating only raw steak and salad and

avoiding anything he considered fattening, like breads, puddings, potatoes and other starches. He had especially pushed himself in running, at which he had grown rusty, and in swimming, which as a sport he did not like. He rightly considered running and swimming his two weakest points. At Fort Myer he had spent time on the pistol range sharpening his already good eye, and he worked out on the base with fencing moves as well. His horsemanship, always excellent, took care of itself.

In Stockholm, however, he made a training mistake no athlete would make today, when knowledge of physiology is so much more sophisticated and training methods are a thousandfold more sophisticated: He did nothing the day before the event. The Pentathlon happened to commence on July 7, and the preceding night in Stockholm—due to its high latitude and the long days of the summer solstice—consisted of one brief hour of darkness. Because of this, the hyped-up Patton was unable to get much sleep.



The Modern Pentathlon began the next morning. It had drawn forty-two actual competitors, though sixty-eight had originally registered. Two other Americans, both civilians, had been slated to participate; but both had dropped out, leaving Patton as America's only representative. The Swedes, who had prepared their contingent for nine months, had eight entrants. The first event was the pistol competition. Each contestant shot two practice rounds. Patton's two warm-up rounds were tens, the highest score possible; but, of course, as practice rounds they didn't

count. Inexplicably, when the actual rounds started, Patton did well in general but twice missed the target completely. He later stated: "This missing of the target, a thing I had done but once in all my practice, made me come out 21 of 42."

This mishap proved disastrous because Patton acquitted himself well in the other events and performed magnificently, under the circumstances, in two of them: fencing and running. In fencing, he was pitted against better-trained European officers, yet managed to finish third after two grueling days in which each contestant faced every other contestant. After the event he proudly remarked: "I was fortunate enough to give the French victor the only defeat he had."

Patton finished sixth in the swimming competition and third in the steeplechase, both admirable accomplishments. His strong finish in the steeplechase was especially impressive because he rode a borrowed Swedish cavalry horse unfamiliar to him. Only a gifted horseman could have performed under the circumstances as superbly as he did. His ride was judged as perfect, though he lost out to two Swedish officers by a narrow margin because their rides, also judged as perfect, were timed slightly faster.

Patton, however, made a near-fatal strategic mistake in the running contest. Before the race his trainer had given him some "hop," as the legal opium extract of the time was called. He went out fast in the four-thousand-meter race but failed to pace himself. He entered the stadium in the lead with fifty meters on his nearest competitor but broke down and had to walk to the finish line. Two Swedes passed him before he reached it. He finished third but fainted after staggering across the finish line. For several

hours thereafter he was in a coma. Because of the foolish use of “hop,” he was actually in mortal danger while in the coma.

Patton’s final overall standing was a fifth-place finish. No doubt he would have won a medal had it not been for the low score in pistol marksmanship, which ironically he considered to be one of his strong points. Most likely his lack of sleep the previous night and his nervousness in the competition’s first event worked against him. Still, his family and his army superiors considered his showing a success, and it redounded to his credit.



As always Patton made the most of the opportunity presented him. His competitors were the kind of officers he admired: aristocratic, stalwart, dignified, unflappable and uncomplaining even when a judgment call went against them in the games. Among them he made many friends. Having been the only fencer to best the French winner, Lieutenant Mas de la Tree, after the games Patton asked many of his former rivals and new friends who they considered the greatest fencing teacher in Europe. He learned it was the man acknowledged as the best swordsman in the French army, Adjutant M. Clery, who taught fencing at the French Cavalry School at Saumur.

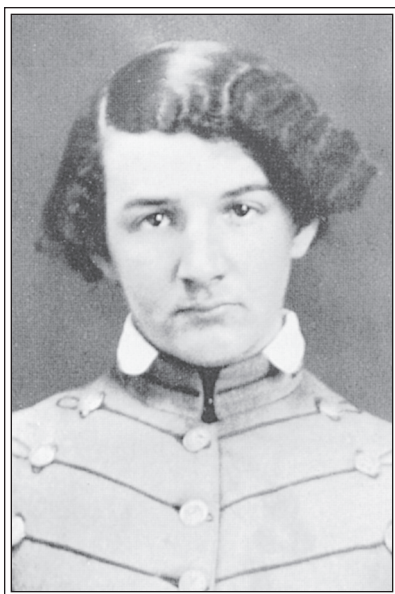
Immediately Patton swung into action. While the Patton clan toured Europe, he convinced Beatrice to accompany him to Saumur, where he had hastily arranged for private fencing lessons with Adjutant Clery. For nearly two solid weeks, Patton benefited from private lessons on swordsmanship. Moreover, with Beatrice sitting beside him in the classroom, Patton audited courses in

swordsmanship taught by Clery to the French Cavalry, noting his philosophy for teaching swordsmanship and the methods he employed. Beatrice, fluent in French, understood every word and each evening helped Patton to transcribe what had been taught. Not only did Patton improve his own swordsmanship, he also learned the philosophy and techniques used by the best swordsmanship teacher in the world.

When Patton returned to the States in late August he reported back to Fort Myer while Beatrice went to Pride's Crossing to spend summer's end with her family. His notoriety now preceded him. He had received a glowing report on his efforts at the Olympics from the senior officer there, Colonel Frederick S. Foltz. In short order he was invited to a dinner with his new friend, Secretary of War Henry Stimson and the army chief of staff, Major General Leonard Wood. That evening Patton recounted to these powerful men not only his Olympic experiences but also the experience he had undergone at Saumur with Adjutant Clery.

Thus Patton acquired another important admirer in General Wood, and for years to come Patton would send him memos suggesting improvements in drills, techniques, or maneuvers, especially as they related to the cavalry. Patton also served occasionally as an aide to Wood, and it was through this connection that Patton advised the Ordnance Department on the new cavalry sword. Principally based on the French model, the U.S. Army cavalry adopted the sword and it became known—as it still is today—as the “Patton sword.” Patton also received a laudatory and appreciative letter from General Wood when he completed a stint as a member of the War Department staff.

By careful lobbying, in 1913 Patton was assigned to Fort Riley in Kansas. There he would attend the Mounted Service School beginning in the fall. During the preceding summer, however, he wrangled orders to once again attend Saumur and study further under Adjutant Clery. He did this and then went to Fort Riley ready to study cavalry techniques more deeply. While at Fort Riley he received good grades in all his subjects. Through proficiency at swordsmanship he emerged as an instructor and earned the official U.S. Army title of “Master of the Sword.”



George S. Patton I, Virginia Military Institute, class of 1852, the general's grandfather who died heroically in the Civil War and influenced his grandson throughout his life.



George Smith Patton II, the general's father (standing), Virginia Military Institute, class of 1877.



Patton, age 7, with his mother, Ruth Wilson Patton, and his sister Nita, 1892.



Patton, age 8, with his pet dog, sitting with his sister Nita in front of their childhood home, Lake Vineyard, 1893.