

# BEDFORD ARMY AIRFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

JUNE 7, 1945

*LIVE EACH DAY TO THE BEST OF YOUR ABILITY AND THE FUTURE WILL TAKE CARE OF  
ITSELF.*

**N**ine hundred and fifty-eight days. Beatrice Ayer Patton knew exactly how long it had been since she last saw her husband when she awoke on June 7, 1945. After enduring the wait for so long, slightly trembling inside whenever the phone rang or a reporter showed up on her doorstep, she finally allowed herself to count the minutes until George would arrive at Bedford Army Airfield.

All she hoped as she stepped out of bed, the house coming to life with the sound of her three children, together for the first time in years, was for better weather.<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts' North Shore had been unseasonably cold and wet for weeks, worrying Beatrice. She opened the curtains and looked across the foggy lawn of Green Meadows, an eighteenth-century Colonial surrounded by three hundred acres of top-notch fox hunting country and most of her family. Unfortunately, the oxidized cannon on the back porch was shrouded in mist.

Beatrice loved the excitement on her four grandchildren's faces when she made them believe the cannon pointed west toward the Ipswich River to protect the house from pirates. The adults sat no less spellbound when she recounted George's World War II exploits, reading from his letters so often she knew them almost by heart.

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A few months after General Patton successfully led the I Armored Corps in the invasion of Morocco in November 1942, Beatrice received a phone call from the South Hamilton train station asking her to pick up a large crate. When told to bring along a handful of strong men, she knew it had to be the cannon George shipped her on an empty military transport from North Africa. No one could explain how a Portuguese bronze cannon barrel dating from the time of Henry IV ended up on a Moroccan shore in the aftermath of Operation Torch.<sup>2</sup> However, when General Truscott heard of the salvage, he knew an inveterate collector and military historian like General Patton would appreciate a gift of this caliber.

Green Meadows slowly evolved from a home into something resembling a museum as George sent over more and more trophies from the battlefield. Beatrice could retrace her husband's steps as commander of the Western Task Force, the Seventh Army, and the Third Army as she walked around the house. In the living room hung a pair of tusks from a wild boar George shot in the Atlas Mountains with the Sultan of Marrakesh, and the closet was filled with blood-stained German uniforms and matching bullet-riddled helmets. Hidden in the garden was a bust of Hitler, which George sent with an accompanying note to place it somewhere the dogs could pee on it, and on the piano lay an 1893 satin spread from Palermo, embroidered with doves and posies. "He has the name and fame of being the toughest, most hard-boiled general in the U.S. Army," she told a reporter when asked about the curious gift. "And he sends me his love, with a bedspread!"<sup>3</sup>

Deep down, Beatrice never expected George to return, yet she never moved the half-finished model boat that stood on his desk, a replica of Napoleon's at St. Helena. Although it had been two years and seven months, she could still hear him say he expected to die fighting as he boarded the battleship *Augusta* on his way to North Africa, but she was comforted by the knowledge that he was finally fulfilling what he considered his destiny.

For as long as she had known George Patton, she had known he fervently believed that he would one day lead a great army in battle. Most people would have found that belief preposterous, especially coming from a seventeen-year-old boy, but Beatrice found his burning ambition endearing. He spoke so passionately that she not only believed him but also decided that she would be the one to accompany him on his quest for glory. It was a decision she never regretted despite the hardships.

Being married to George Patton was a constant challenge, but Beatrice loved a challenge as much as she loved defying social conventions. Her small stature belied a woman of incredible strength, with a personality that radiated "like a brilliant gem."<sup>4</sup> Her daughter Ruth Ellen once said she was "a pocket Venus" with a heart of gold, but Beatrice was also fierce, independent, and incredibly strong-willed. Those who met her in her travels as an emissary of

the War Department were surprised that the wife of General Patton was a dainty and charming woman, yet she was as tough and volatile as he was.

After years of waiting and anxiety, Beatrice got down on her knees to pray when the bells had pealed across South Hamilton a month earlier to signify the end of the war in Europe.<sup>5</sup> It truly was a miracle that George survived, never shirking danger as he led from the front, yet she knew him well enough to realize he would now try everything in his power to join the continuing war in the Pacific. But first, he would be given the hero's welcome he'd always dreamed of.

June 7 was an unusually cold day even for Boston, with temperatures not expected to rise above sixty-six degrees. Beatrice hesitated to wear the new floral dress she bought for the occasion but decided to add a black coat to ward off the chill, and completed her outfit with a green sailor's hat with white felt seagulls.<sup>6</sup> When she looked in the mirror, she was happy to note that she had kept her svelte figure, practicing what she preached to army wives across the country: "Keep faith in God, keep fit, and keep well."

George Patton was the only man Beatrice ever loved, and her heart fluttered at the thought of seeing him again. Over the last two-and-a-half years, she'd often gone to the theater to watch the latest *United News* presentations, hoping to catch a glimpse of him in the short news clippings. He appeared larger than life to the strangers surrounding her, but she recognized his face as the one he had practiced in the mirror for decades. She was the one who gave him the strength to put on his war face, to become General Patton, a persona he cultivated his whole life based on how he thought a true general should look and act.

Beatrice could hardly wait to see the real George Patton again, the kind and generous man she fell in love with forty-three years earlier.

GENERAL PATTON GLIMPSED the Massachusetts countryside below as the C-54 Skymaster circled Bedford Army Airfield looking for a passage through the clouds. The lush fields were in stark contrast to the destroyed land he had left behind in Germany three days earlier. If only people could see it through his eyes, they'd realize "what your soldiers have kept from you."<sup>7</sup> Except for his family, no one seemed to understand "that one cannot fight for two-and-a-half years and be the same. Yet you are expected to get back into the identical groove from which you departed and from which your non-warlike compatriots have never moved."<sup>8</sup>

George always expected, and even hoped, to die fighting in Europe, an end befitting a true warrior who dies "with the last bullet of the last battle of the war." But instead, his Third Army had stopped fighting on May 8, 1945, after Nazi Germany signed an unconditional surrender at the Allied headquarters

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in Reims. While the world's reaction was one of endless joy and relief, the end of the war in Europe left General Patton feeling "nervous."<sup>9</sup> It was a big letdown for someone who loved the challenge of war, who "loved the mechanics and the interplay of intelligence and historical memory."<sup>10</sup> He couldn't adequately explain it, but he considered war "as much or more of an art than sculpture, it is really a very beautiful intellectual contest."<sup>11</sup>

George was looking forward to all the accolades afforded a war hero, but he was itching to join the war in the Pacific. The tremendous responsibility of commanding hundreds of thousands of soldiers occasionally felt "like a ton of bricks," but in his opinion, war was the only thing he was good at.<sup>12</sup> The record certainly agreed: he led the first Americans into battle during Operation Torch in North Africa, he invaded Sicily with the Seventh Army, and after a few tense months in the doghouse because of his customary forthrightness, he drove the Third Army "farther and faster than any army in history."<sup>13</sup>

Many of the forty-five Third Army officers and enlisted men on board the C-54 Skymaster had been by General Patton's side for years, including Master Sergeant George Meeks, his African American orderly for the last seven years, and Colonel Charles Codman, his aide-de-camp and an aristocratic Bostonian who loved conversing with his boss in French.<sup>14</sup> These men stood by his side, sticking to him like limpets, as dedicated and loyal as the woman who continuously stood by his side in spirit. He hadn't made things easy on his "Beat" the last few years, but she unfailingly shared in his burdens. There was no denying he owed much of his success to her, without question the only woman in the world who could have stayed married to him for thirty-five years.

At six foot two, George stood more than a head taller than Beatrice, yet she was the rock he'd leaned on since he was seventeen. "I wish you were a coach," he wrote her in 1907, "for some how you seem to be able to make me try harder, sort of give me extra willpower."<sup>15</sup> Beatrice was his inspiration, the one who allayed his doubts and fears, stroked his ego, tempered his anger, and delivered the flowers while he delivered the blows.<sup>16</sup> She never curbed his fighting spirit, accepting without complaint that he might one day make the ultimate sacrifice in order to become a great battlefield commander.<sup>17</sup>

George couldn't wait to look into Beatrice's "brave loyal eyes" again.<sup>18</sup> Even after all these years, he still felt a sense of wonder that she chose to spend her life with him. Since the Ayers were entrepreneurs with no military tradition, he worried at first that being an army wife might not come easy to her. However, Beatrice turned out to be "a good soldier" who fought the war on the home front three times, earning her the title of "number one Army woman."<sup>19</sup> George always remained conscious of Beatrice's sacrifices, so his efforts to fulfill his destiny were as much for her as for himself. He had said it most eloquently in 1928 in a toast to the ladies of the Army, hoping that "we

[the officers] live to make them happy, or, and the Great Day come, so die as to make them proud.”<sup>20</sup>

It had always been George’s “plan to be killed in this war, and I damned near accomplished it,” but his luck had held and he was on his way back to the United States, victorious and alive.<sup>21</sup> He believed that one was born with a certain amount of luck, but by the end of the war, each shell seemed to land closer and closer, and recently an oxcart had barreled down a street in Germany and narrowly missed his car. Deep down, George Patton felt the reunion with his family would also be his farewell.

AT 3:44 P.M., the fleet of three C-54s and their six Flying Fortress escorts landed at Bedford Army Airfield, twenty minutes early. The fifty-nine-year-old general had a spring in his step as he emerged from the plane despite being ill with strep throat, and the sun started to shine when he put his feet on American soil for the first time in nearly three years. As soon as he saluted Major General Sherman Miles, commanding officer of the First Service Command in Boston, and shook hands with Massachusetts Governor Maurice J. Tobin, he searched the crowd for his wife.

Beatrice’s heart skipped a beat as the plane’s door opened and her displeasure at being relegated to the sidelines disappeared as soon as she caught sight of George. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the patchwork of battle ribbons on his chest. She waited patiently in the reviewing stand with her children, but she had been counting the minutes since the moment she found out he was returning home, and joy overtook her. She pushed the reporters and photographers aside and ran up to George, who took off his helmet to welcome her embrace.



*Figure 1. A twenty-second reunion at Bedford Army Airfield on June 7, 1945. (Library of Congress)*

"Hello," Beatrice said as she threw her arms around her husband's neck and kissed him on the cheek. "I am so glad to have you back." She was so overcome with emotions that she couldn't say more, so she briefly placed her hand on his face to make sure it wasn't all a dream.<sup>22</sup> The moment lasted a mere twenty seconds, then George IV, granted a two-day leave from West Point, embraced his father with a heartfelt, "Hi'ya, Pop!" Next came kisses and hugs from his daughters, Little Bee and Ruth Ellen, and a handshake from his son-in-law, Lieutenant Colonel James Totten.

These few minutes were all the family had before duty called again. When George walked away to receive a seventeen-gun salute and review the honor guard, he winked at Beatrice. "He looks well," she whispered to her daughters, wiping tears from her eyes. He appeared trim and slender in his gray riding breeches, with the four stars of a full general on his shiny helmet. Some journalists described General Patton as an old man coming home from the war. Still, he had never felt better than during the last three years, despite the heavy workload and the continuous proximity to death and destruction.

General Patton's arrival had been carefully planned. A mere fifteen minutes after landing, it was time to join the motorcade destined for the Charles River Esplanade in the Back Bay area of Boston. Beatrice took a seat in the second car with her son and daughters, while George rode in the lead car with Governor Tobin and General Miles. Close to one million people lined the twenty-five-mile route, part of which covered, in reverse, the same path of Paul Revere's midnight ride some 170 years earlier.<sup>23</sup>

As the motorcade drove at ten miles per hour through the villages of Lexington, Arlington, and Cambridge, George sat on the back of his seat and waved to the crowd with his riding crop. "The only excuses for the horrors of war are glories," he would exclaim later that month, and the crowd certainly did not disappoint.<sup>24</sup> Beatrice felt like her heart would burst with pride as she watched the people of Massachusetts throw flowers at his car while fire trucks lined the route and turned on their sirens as he passed.<sup>25</sup> When she saw his beaming face look back at her, she knew this was the culmination of everything they had worked so hard for.

Beatrice's mind filled with memories as the motorcade crossed the Cottage Farm Bridge across the Charles River into Boston. Turning left onto Commonwealth Avenue, they drove past number 395, better known as the Ayer Mansion because it had been commissioned by her parents—Frederick and Ellie Ayer—from Louis Comfort Tiffany in 1902. Her family sold the home a long time ago, but the memories remained: the living room with the grand piano she played with remarkable skill; the foyer, covered in Tiffany mosaics, which acted like a stage; the library where George had finally admitted his



love; and the third-floor bedroom in which she had locked herself when her father was reluctant to give his permission to marry.

Frederick Ayer had been a hardworking and humble entrepreneur who had been the wealthiest man in New England. He was ahead of his time in many of his beliefs and raised his seven children in a nurturing environment that allowed all of them to thrive. Beatrice enjoyed a loving childhood in the lap of luxury, yet she gave it all up to follow George Patton wherever the Army sent him. While it was hard at first to adjust to the simple life of dusty campgrounds and forlorn towns, she never regretted becoming Mrs. Patton. The joy she felt today in sharing this moment of glory with George was worth all their sacrifices.

AT 6:30 P.M., an hour late because of the crowds, the motorcade arrived at the Hatch Shell, an outdoor amphitheater on the Charles River Esplanade. More than twenty-thousand people awaited General Patton's nine-minute speech, but he had eyes only for the roughly three hundred officers and soldiers sitting in the front rows.

"Those heroes are first in my heart," he said in his surprisingly high-pitched voice, which was completely incongruous with the image he portrayed. "I speak of the men who regardless of ice, regardless of snow, went on and on." As he would repeatedly proclaim over the next few days, he was just "a hook" on which the honors of the Third Army were hung, "This great ovation by Boston is not for Patton the General, but Patton as a symbol for the Third Army."<sup>26</sup>

He reminded his audience of the unspeakable horrors of war most people only read about, and his voice began to quiver when he mentioned "the soldier with his naked bosom . . . [who] crossed rivers that couldn't be crossed and plowed through where nobody could plow through." Those soldiers now looked at him from the front rows, many still recovering from wounds they had sustained during the Third Army's fighting in France and Germany. "I can't say anymore," George abruptly concluded his speech when his gentle character broke through his much-practiced war face.<sup>27</sup>

Some might have found General Patton's demeanor rather incredible considering that he slapped two battle-fatigued soldiers in Sicily, but he cared deeply for his men. Few people realized there were actually two George Pattons, and Beatrice was intimately acquainted with both: the warrior who spoke "a song of hate" to motivate his soldiers and the tender-hearted man who once compared her "to the dawning day, What day was e'er so beautiful as you?"<sup>28</sup> Those who knew George personally were aware he possessed a wonderful side that the public never knew, a side which surfaced again a few hours later at the state dinner given in his honor.<sup>29</sup>



*Figure 2. Arriving at the Copley Plaza Hotel: Cadet Patton, General Patton, Beatrice Ayer Patton, Ruth Ellen Patton Totten, and Beatrice Patton Waters. (Patton Museum)*

After a frantic search for Beatrice's bag containing her evening gown, the motorcade proceeded to the Copley Plaza Hotel, where the Patton family spent an hour and a half together in the privacy of a suite. When they finally entered the hotel's ballroom at 8:30 p.m., the band struck up the "2nd Armored Division March," composed by Beatrice in 1941 when George was commander of the 2nd Armored Division at Fort Benning.

Over five hundred guests were seated in the ballroom, many of them people who had supported Beatrice during George's absence, from Ayer family members such as her sister Katharine "Kay" Merrill and nephew Count Mario Guardabassi, to close family friends such as Mr. and Mrs. Gordon Prince, and Dr. and Mrs. Franc Ingraham. Thousands more waited outside to catch a glimpse of the famous general, yet for all but a handful of those in attendance, tonight would be the last time they ever saw him.<sup>30</sup>

Beatrice sat between Governor Dale of New Hampshire and Governor Tobin, who began his speech by paying tribute to her, "the model of a soldier's wife." George vigorously applauded that statement as he took the stage next, hoping "that everyone noticed the enthusiasm with which I cheered the most appropriate words of the Governor in respect to my wife and not the most inappropriate words in regard to me." Any medal or accolade he ever received, he proudly shared with Beatrice because "without my Generals, and my wife, the war with the Germans might have lasted a great deal longer."<sup>31</sup> Beatrice smiled politely, as usual giving little outward indication of her feelings, a stark contrast with her husband, who was soon overcome with emotions again.



George would be castigated for his next remark, infuriating Beatrice, who was sick and tired of his words being misconstrued by the press. "When we foolishly mourn for those men who have died, we are wrong," he spoke off the cuff. "We should thank God that such men were born." Once again, he could "say no more," and he sat back down between Governor and Mrs. Tobin, wiping his tears with a handkerchief without any hint of embarrassment.<sup>32</sup> While this open show of emotion surprised most people in the audience, his family knew George was an impassioned man whose dashing manner camouflaged a sensitive soul. He was a study in contradictions: brutal yet sensitive, gregarious yet lonesome, volatile yet loyal. He was an enigma of his own creation, which few people knew how to crack.

Separated from her husband by Mr. Tobin, Beatrice watched as George was constantly interrupted by autograph seekers while he tried to finish his lobster cocktail. She understood him without words, though, and she knew he was happy to indulge every single one of them. George enjoyed adulation and recognition since he was a little boy, and she provided both in abundance throughout their marriage. George Patton was the center of his own universe, and he was the center of Beatrice's. Such a man would have crushed those less confident and determined than she was, but she thrived on it. If George was indeed living his life ordained by destiny, then Beatrice was part of the plan all along.



*Figure 3. The Pattons return to Green Meadows in the early morning of June 8, 1945, exhausted after a long day of public appearances. (Library of Congress)*

The evening finally ended at 1:15 a.m. with a press conference, albeit brief, because the Pattons had a train to catch so George could finally sleep in his own bed again. It was a very short night; by 8:00 a.m., Beatrice and George were already on their way to the airport to continue his war bond selling tour on the West Coast. They would not return to Green Meadows until June 16th for a well-earned rest.

Besides horseback riding, sailing, and social calls, Beatrice and George just sat quietly holding hands while looking out over the rolling hills of Myopia Hunt country. "When there is so much to go into," Beatrice reminisced years later, "where does one begin?"<sup>33</sup>