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Patton Swimming Across an Icy River Under Fire: Fact or Myth?

The news raced across the United States.

The headline on the *New York Herald Tribune* read: “How Patton Swam the Sure River to Inspire his Troops.” *The Hartford Courant*: “Patton Twice Swims Icy Sure River Under Fire, Inspiring Men to Follow.” *The Washington Post*: “Patton Swam Sure Twice to Inspire His Men.” *The Atlanta Constitution*: “Patton Swims Icy River Twice, GIs Follow to Capture Town.” *The Christian Science Monitor*: “Patton Swims Across Icy River To Show Men It Can Be Done.” And the *Los Angeles Times*: “Patton Swims Icy River Twice Under Nazi Fire.” And that’s just the major newspapers. Even the *Stars & Stripes*, the newspaper for the frontline fighting man, reported simply: “Patton Swam the Sure.”

The story became a sensation. Even comedian Bob Hope reported that West Point had enlarged its swimming pool and filled it with ice cubes to inspire the Cadets. He also joked that the U.S. Navy had offered to make Patton into “a one-man destroyer.”¹

Could this be true? Did General George S. Patton, Jr., the 64-year-old commander of the Third Army, swim a freezing river under fire, as enemy shells exploded around him, to inspire his men? Or was this just another fantastical story of the famed General’s heroism?

By the time the story appeared in newspapers in early March 1945, Patton was already a military legend. He had defeated the Vichy French in Morocco, helped push the Axis Powers out of Sicily, raced across France—helping to destroy two German armies in the process, and relieved besieged American forces in Bastogne, Belgium, helping to crush Adolf Hitler’s last hope for victory. Since he had landed in North Africa in November of 1942, troops under his command had conducted five amphibious assaults and crossed countless rivers. Reporters seemed to cover everything about Patton, from the heroic to the cruel, and he always made for good copy.

While the story made headlines in 1945, it disappeared when Patton’s story was written. Historian Martin Blumenson made no mention of it in his *The Patton Papers*, or his subsequent books on the General. Carlo D’Este did not include the story in his massive tome, *Patton: Genius for War*. Nor did historians Ladislav Farago, H. Essame, and John Nelson Rickard mention it in their books about Patton. Robert Patton did not include it in his family history, *The Pattons*.

So is the story true? Yes. Three eyewitness accounts corroborate the hard-to-believe-yet true story of Patton shedding his clothes, climbing into a river and swimming across and back on January 19, 1945. And it truly did inspire his men.

The story that started the stir came from an Associated Press interview with Staff Sergeant Thomas J. Defibaugh, date lined for March 7, 1945. Defibaugh, a native of Cumberland, Maryland, was touring U.S. war plants to boost Home Front morale. He had earned the right to return to the United States as one of the heroes of Bastogne, picked to tell stories of heroism in stopping the German counteroffensive—the Battle of the Bulge. Defibaugh was

reported to be from the 4th Infantry Division. If so, he would have been from the division's 8th Infantry Regiment, the only regiment along the Sure at that time.²

As Defibaugh told it, Patton had swum the Sure River, in Germany, under heavy machinegun and artillery fire. The river was about 150 feet wide. Defibaugh was quoted:

“There was about a foot of snow on the ground when we got to the Sure River somewhere near the meeting place of the Luxembourg, German and Belgian borders. We learned that we had to take the town of Bettendorf on the opposite side and do it quickly. The Germans began firing machine guns and artillery at us as we came up to the river bank. Just before dawn we started going across in three-man boats. The river was very swift and cold and had pieces of ice floating in it. After a while though, Gen. Patton called the boats back and ordered the men to swim across with rifles, bazookas and everything they could carry because they were ‘sitting pigeons’ for the Germans in the boats, sitting two or three feet out of the water. He figured the men would have a better chance swimming since they would then present only the tops of their heads as targets to the enemy gunners. To show us it could be done and to inspire the troops, General Patton jumped into the water and swam across to the opposite bank, then swam back. Thousands of troops followed him.”

Defibaugh concluded that the soldiers fought “like madmen,” and took Bettendorf after a bitter day-and-a-half of fighting.³

Many soldiers did not believe the story. Defibaugh mistakenly claimed the river crossing occurred in Germany, not Luxembourg. Soldiers reading the story in *Stars & Stripes*, mistook the Sure River for the Sauer River, a wide, fast-flowing river that bordered Germany. The fact that the story came out in March about an incident that occurred in January led to the confusion, since Defibaugh never provided the date of the swim. A.Z. Adkins, a soldier in the 80th Infantry Division, claimed that Patton had crossed the Sauer River on a partially submerged footbridge under a smoke screen, “almost giving the impression of walking on water.” Once that story made the rounds, the story of the swim faded and returned to the world of myth.⁴

But another witness stepped forward. After Patton's death, a letter to Patton was published from Corporal Edward Doherty of Quincy Shore Drive, Massachusetts. Doherty served with Company B, 503rd MP Battalion, a unit attached to Patton's Third Army during the latter-half of the European campaign. He wrote: "I'll never forget the day you told us to stay on shore while you swam that river. What a thrill it was watching you, and then when you were sure it was safe, we all followed you over."⁵ Doherty's letter, written after the war, did not cause the same commotion as the Defibaugh article, but it does mirror Defibaugh's story. I am not sure where the letter was published, but Beatrice Patton, the general's wife, pasted it into the family scrapbook after the war.

The last eyewitness account came from Frederick Johnson, a combat engineer who was at the river when Patton arrived. Johnson, interviewed by Jerimiah Johnson and submitted to the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project, remembered the incident a bit differently. As he told it:

"After the Battle of the Bulge, I can remember my outfit was putting a bridge across the Moselle River. Ice was going down the river and every time we just about get half way across the bridge the Germans would open up with 88s across the river and blow up the bridge. General Patton shows up, he looked and asked what the problem was, he wanted a bridge across the river and we told him what the problem was cause the Germans opened up on the bridge. And he said okay, I understand, what he did was he took off his twin volt belts, his holsters, his .45s, gave them to his driver, took off his grey coat. Went down to the river, swam across the river and swam back and he says now what's the problem?"⁶

Johnson misidentified the Sure as the Moselle River, which had already been crossed in October and November. He clearly states that the incident occurred after the Battle of the Bulge, which officially ended on January 17, 1945, meaning it could not have been the Moselle.

The records of the 8th Infantry Regiment provide the most accurate picture of what happened on the January 18 and 19. According to the regiment's S-3 Journal for January 18-19, 1945, at 1305 (1:05 in the afternoon) Company F, under a Lieutenant Burke "started to cross the river—meeting SA (sporadic artillery) and mortar fire." There were no reports of the unit succeeding. About an hour later Major General Manton Eddy, the XII Corps Commander, stopped by the regimental headquarters and said that the 5th Infantry Division, on the 8th Infantry's right flank, had been given orders to occupy Bettendorf. At 1645, Company I had reported to have successfully crossed the river, but it had not. By 2245 (10:45 PM) the Germans began shelling the area until 0200 the next day—four hours. At 0330 on December 19, one boat was reported sunk by German fire and three men were wounded. About 15 minutes later all contact had been lost with L Company but it was, "believe[d] making progress." I Company also reported to have one company across the river, but again it was not so. By 0400, according to the log, "none of 'I' Company across because of heavy MG (machine gun) fire." A few minutes later the report stated, "None of 'B' Co is across." Within an hour, I Company tried crossing from another location, with the battalion reporting, "results unknown," but, "S/A including MGs and bazookas are heard in I Co vic (vicinity)-quite a lot of fire." There was still no word from L Company.

By 0500, three platoons from A Company had crossed and the fourth was preparing to cross. A little after 0600, I Company managed to get four boats across. It was then that the regiment's commander, Colonel R.G. McKee ordered a footbridge built across the Sure. Within the hour I Company reported that it was having difficulty with its inflatable rafts "because of the swiftness of the river," and was resorting to wooden M-2 boats. By 0750, I Company reported,

“can’t cross in present loc (location) because of the swiftness of the river. Men are wet and lost a lot of boats.” By 0845, the bridge had been established and I and K companies were crossing.⁷

While the journal makes no mention of Patton, it does convey the difficulties the various companies faced from both the river and German fire. It records the failed crossings, the destroyed boats, and the footbridge which eventually allowed the soldiers passage.

Patton never wrote about the incident. In his diary, he made no mention of visiting the front on January 19, only that he met with his corps commanders and that the sun came out around noon and planes were flying. He did pen the day before that he visited the 4th Infantry Division with his Major General Eddy, and that the soldiers “seemed apathetic.” He further recorded that, “at the time of our visit they had two companies of different battalions across the river and were unable to reinforce them.” Patton wrote that he ordered the 4th’s commander, Major General H.W. Blakeley, to get to the area and make sure “his battalion commanders crossed the river.” The failed attempts could have prompted Patton to visit the front himself, something common to him.⁸

Patton wrote to his wife, Beatrice, on January 20, but again made no mention of the swim. He instead wrote about his upcoming offensive, his hope that the Russians had liberated a German POW camp which held his son-in-law, Major John Waters, and whether or not his dog, Willie, needed a sweater, to ward off the cold. He complained about the weather, writing that, “it is snowing like hell again,” and he compared his Army’s one-mile-a-day progress to the opposite of laxatives.⁹

He did sent Beatrice a picture of a bridge crossing, but it showed soldiers in summer uniforms, wearing only helmet liners, crossing a footbridge, which he claimed was how he

crossed the Sure River, “stepping over dead bodies” as he went. He may have sent it to her to dissuade her from learning the truth, or he may have actually crossed the river in that fashion back in December of 1944, when the Sure River stood as the only natural barrier on the way to Bastogne.¹⁰

But Beatrice did find out about her husband’s famous swim. When told about it by reporters, she responded that her husband, “was a great swimmer,” and “easily could have done it.” She referenced his performance in the Modern Pentathlon, which involved a 200-meter swim, “He has swum all his life,” she said. “In the Olympic Games in 1912, he came in third in a swimming event.”¹¹

To Patton, this may have just been another day at war. There were still months of fighting ahead and there was no time to reflect on his latest effort to keep his army moving. The swim across the Sure River, which seemed so impressive to readers back home, did not cause a blip on Patton’s radar.

Why was the story lost to history? Simple. When Blumenson wrote *The Patton Papers*, he only had access to Patton’s diaries and letters, not his scrapbooks and photo albums. Most subsequent historians used his two-volumes when they wrote their own books on Patton. Only a detailed scanning of wartime newspapers would have revealed the tale. The most recent account of the swim was published in 2005, in *You Can’t Get Much Closer Than This*, by A.Z. Atkins. Of course that account casts doubt the whole story.

With three eyewitness accounts, despite their own flaws and incorrect locations, prove that General George S. Patton certainly did swim across the freezing Sure River in Luxembourg

under fire, and swam back, inspiring his men to attack. The story, so long forgotten to history, can now take its place back on the mantle of the Patton legend.

¹ “It Says Here” by Bob Hope, *King Features Syndicate*, 1945, Patton Scrapbooks, Reel 1 (microfilm), the Patton Collection, Manuscripts division, Library of Congress.

² Roland Gaul, *The Battle of the Bulge in Luxembourg: The Southern Flank, December 1944-January 1945, Volume II: The Americans* (Atglen: Schiffer Military/Aviation History, 1995) 213.

³ Untitled AP Press Report, 03/07/1945, Patton Scrapbook, Reel 1, the Patton Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

⁴ A.Z. Atkins, *You Can't Get Much Closer Than This: Combat With Company H, 317th Infantry Regiment, 80th Infantry Division* (Oxford: Casemate, 2005), 153.

⁵ “Touching Memorial to Patton,” untitled newspaper clipping, 11/14/1947. Patton Scrapbooks, Reel 1 (microfilm), the Patton Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

⁶ Johnson, Frederick, interviewed by Jeremiah Johnson, pages 4, Veterans History Project, LOC.

⁷ Record Group 407, Records of the Adjutant General, WWII Operations Reports, 1940-48, 4th Infantry Division, 304 INF(8)-3.2 NOV 1945 to 304 INF(8)-3.2 APR 1945, box 5853, National Archives and Records Administration.

⁸ GSP Diary, 18 January 1945, the Patton Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

⁹ GSP to BAP, 20 January 1945, box 12, file 19, The Patton Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

¹⁰ Kevin M. Hymel, *Patton's Photographs: War As He Saw It* (Dulles: Potomac Books, 2006), 82.

¹¹ Jack Matcha, “Maryland GI Tells How Patton Swam River to Inspire Troops,” *The Sun*, Baltimore, Maryland, 08 March 1945.