

Chapter 1

The general smiled almost sheepishly as he handed me a letter that had just arrived a few hours earlier in the morning mail. His usual pleasant demeanor hardly masked a touch of honest curiosity. I took the envelope from him and saw that it had been opened, a clean slit running the length of the spine. His name and address were neatly typed on the front and I was wondering why it merited my attention. Then I noticed the return address and hurried to see what was inside.

“What do you make of this?” the general asked.

I pulled out the contents of the envelope, a cover letter on high-quality business stationery and a few folded sheets of copy paper. I began to read. The letter was from Frank McCarthy, the Hollywood producer. McCarthy said he was making a movie about General George S. Patton Jr. and because the general had been an important member of the Patton staff, he was in it.

I was excited about the news.

“Congratulations. You’re going to be in the movies,” I said.

“Maybe.”

The general’s approval was necessary, McCarthy informed him, and those portions of the movie script that included the lines for “Colonel Oscar Koch” were enclosed. Would he please look them over and send the movie-makers his authorization, in writing? And then this caveat: If he chose not to give the script his blessing, “we can fictionalize the character by substituting another name and making sure that the actor we choose to play the role does not look like you.”¹

The general looked somewhat uncomfortable. I knew that he was a very modest man, but I knew, also, that he was immensely proud of his long association with Patton. He certainly would want to be in this movie. And by all means should be. What was the problem?

“Take a look at the script,” he said.

I was surprised to see that the lines of script attributed to “Colonel Oscar Koch” were few in number. In his post as G-2, the head of intelligence, Oscar Koch—long since promoted from colonel to brigadier general—had played a vital part in Patton’s successes during World War II. He and Patton had been friends for many years, going back to a time well before the war began, and from then until Patton’s death Oscar Koch had been a close and trusted confidant and advisor. He would be the first to label himself “a Patton man.”

“That’s not what I did,” the general said, arching a finger toward the script. “There’s no way I can approve this.”

As I looked over the skimpy segments of movie script McCarthy had offered, I saw at once that the lines grossly distorted Koch’s real-life role with Patton. Further, without the rest of the script to put the Koch dialog into context, it was impossible to envision precisely how he would be characterized. But I’d seen enough to make me angry.

“This line makes you look like a fool,” I told the general.

He laughed. “Maybe they know me better than we think.”

“Like hell. Patton didn’t countenance fools, not from what you’ve told me. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll write this man and tell him I can’t sign off on this but I’m willing to help fix their script if he’s interested. Is it all right with you if I offer to send along parts of our book, if he’d like to see it?”

I said, “Of course. Give him anything he wants. You ought to be in this movie.”

A few days later, the general wrote a polite response to Frank McCarthy. He told the producer that he could not approve the script as it was and offered to help correct it. He never heard anything more. True to McCarthy’s word, Oscar Koch was replaced in the movie by a fictitious character named “Colonel Gaston Bell.”

I’m happy that General Koch confided in me that day and shared the content of Frank McCarthy’s letter. Otherwise, I might never have

known why he was not portrayed in the 1970 movie, “Patton,” which was very good in spite of some glaring factual errors and other omissions. The general and I were friends, and at the time we were collaborating on a book on combat intelligence that eventually was published under the title, *G-2: Intelligence for Patton*.²

We were an improbable team. I was only nine years old in December 1944, when Oscar Koch earned authentic World War II hero status as he stood virtually alone in warning Allied military leaders of the coming breakout by German Army troops in what would come to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. There is ample evidence that had General Dwight Eisenhower and General Omar Bradley acted on Koch’s information, the lives of thousands of American soldiers might have been saved and the war in Europe might have been shortened significantly. Patton was the only one to take his warning seriously and plan accordingly. The U.S. Third Army was ready to move when Eisenhower gave Patton the green light.

Oscar Koch had chosen to be a professional soldier and spent almost four decades in the U.S. Army; I had been drafted at age twenty and couldn’t wait to serve my time and return to civilian life. He retired from military life a year before I first put on the Army uniform. It was mere chance that led us to cross paths. In spite of our differences in age and background, though, we developed a deep and abiding friendship. I came to respect, admire—and yes, love—this man, who influenced my life in more ways than I can count.

I was granted only four years to share life with the general, a period that was far too short. In the beginning he lifted my spirits as we joined in a common purpose. In the end, I endured the anguish of watching an insidious cancer purloin the life from his body even though he never would surrender his gallant spirit. But what a remarkable four years it was, how grateful I am to have had that privilege.

I met General Oscar Koch early in 1966, a trying time in America. Opposition to the war in Vietnam, where more than two hundred thousand U.S. troops were involved, appeared to grow more intense almost daily and open racial strife had become virtually commonplace in much of the nation. Network television news reports brought both the war and the racial disturbances into the homes of viewers. Intense opposition to the draft led to open defiance of a new federal law against draft-card burning.

Conservative opinion writers railed against the protests. On the other side were news media such as the Capital Times in Madison, Wisconsin, which carried an April editorial calling for editors and law enforcement officials to stop trying to create “an atmosphere of war hysteria in which emotionalism and chauvinism are substituted for reason and patriotism.” In defense of the antiwar protestors, the newspaper said that millions of patriotic Americans considered the nation’s Vietnam policy a tragic mistake. “In this country,” it reminded readers, “they have a right to speak their views and demonstrate for them—as much right as those who think our Viet Nam policy is sound.”³

American citizens were nearly evenly divided in terms of support for and opposition to the war. Yet there still was immense sentimental backing for the soldiers. Sergeant Barry Sadler’s recording of the touching “Ballad of the Green Berets” became the most popular song in the country in early March and held that position for more than three months.

The general and I made a conscious effort not to be sidetracked by the social turmoil going on around us. This was difficult, and we did not ignore it. We simply were careful, as he expressed it one day, “not to waste too much time discussing how we could fix all the problems in the world if the powers that be only would listen to us.” It was important that we kept our eyes on our own goal, the completion of a book on intelligence in combat.

I was a special correspondent for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (which means that I wrote for the newspaper on a free-lance basis) and early in our relationship I had persuaded the general to let me write a feature about him and his wartime experiences under Patton. It hadn't been an easy sell. I think my argument that his story would only enhance Patton's reputation was the one that eventually won him over.

The article turned out well, but when I read it today it strikes me as painfully incomplete. I know a great many things about General Koch now that I wish I had known then. High on this list would be his masterful use of ULTRA, the secret British intercepts of enemy radio messages after they'd broken the German code. But at that time even the existence of ULTRA had not yet been revealed, and Oscar Koch was not one to go against restrictions on what he should talk about. I also wish I had known that he spent two years near the end of his military career on a virtually clandestine assignment to the U.S. State Department helping to strengthen the work of the CIA and took special assignments after he retired. This one may not have mattered, though, as he downplayed the significance of that critical tour of duty even after I learned about it some months later. I doubt that he would have been particularly forthcoming on that experience, either.

This is not to say that he was reluctant to answer my questions. It merely is an acknowledgment of the fact that he didn't particularly like to talk about himself, especially when someone wanted to make him sound "important." He was a team player, and in his mind no individual should outshine the team. Except for the captain—Patton himself.