



General Patton Takes the California Desert

Cavalry leader turned tank expert creates the largest military training facility ever built — the Desert Training Center.

Story and Photo by Tom Graves

While the Desert Training Center was open during World War II, more than a million soldiers and airmen had to face harsh enemies constantly: heat, sand, wind, scorpions, tarantulas and rattlesnakes.

The goal was to train the soldiers and airmen for the planned campaign against Rommel's German forces in North Africa. Major General George S. Patton was given the task of finding the right place to house and train hundreds of thousands of soldiers for desert warfare.

After flyovers from March Army Air Base in March, 1942, Patton chose the eastern part of Mojave Desert where it joins the Colorado Desert.

"The area's vastness, suitable terrain, lack of population and demanding weather were not the only favorable ingredients of the area that was soon to become the largest military training facility in the world," wrote Brigadier General David C. Henley in his book *The Land That God Forgot, The Saga of Gen. George Patton's Desert Training Camps*. "There were also three railroads and a comparatively good highway system serving the massive territory."

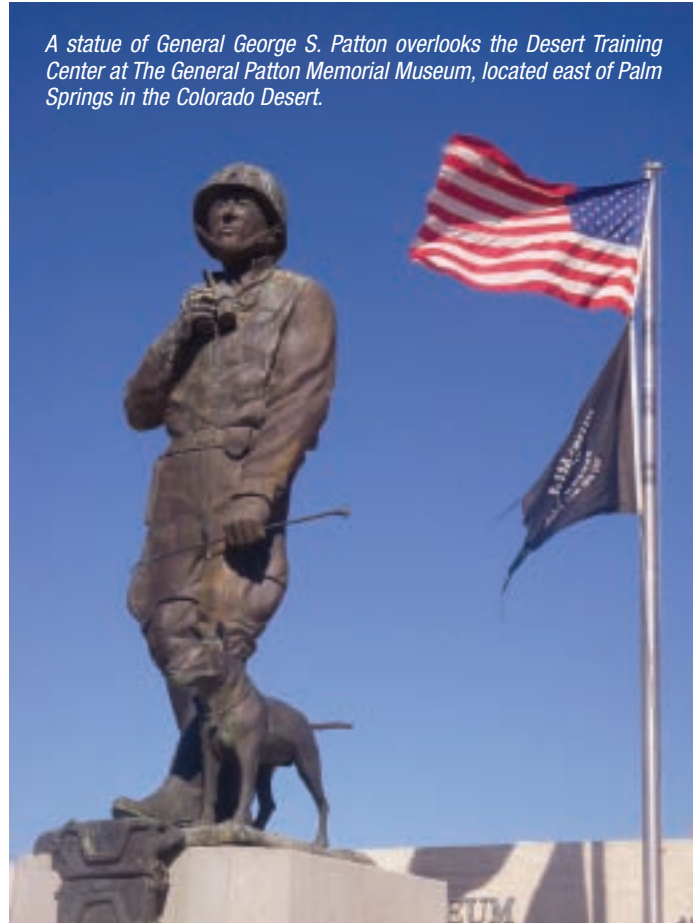
Additional railways and new buildings were quickly assembled and hundreds of tanks shipped in by train.

With its arid expanse of wide valleys, salt basins, sand dunes and alluvial fans, Patton had found the remote location he was looking for and set up headquarters at Camp Young, near Shaver's Summit. The training area grew to encompass parts of western Arizona, and southern Nevada. Nineteen months after training started, it was renamed the California-Arizona Maneuver Area (CAMA).

Troops learned to march their daily mile with full packs in heat that was 120 degrees in the shade. Sand got into food as well as eyes and mouths. Facilities were spartan.

Patton tapped into the California aqueduct for water supply

A statue of General George S. Patton overlooks the Desert Training Center at The General Patton Memorial Museum, located east of Palm Springs in the Colorado Desert.



and notified the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. When told approval for tapping into the city's water supply might take months, he replied, "Get your paperwork started because we're going to need that water."

With pit latrines and a ration of one canteen a day, the training center's water consumption was far from excessive. Patton was dead set against letting the soldiers fall prey to any "soft living," and stayed in Camp Young's ramshackle wood-and-tarpaper billets himself.

"Men often napped under their equipment after going 36 hours without sleep," wrote Valerie Porter in an article for American Heritage Travel. "Food and water were rationed in order to duplicate desert fighting conditions. Soldiers shaved while sitting in the dirt, their shaving water often at 100 degrees without being heated."

The men had to find inventive ways to ward off pests.

"Scorpions, tarantulas and rattlesnakes were held at bay by pouring diesel fuel on the ground near messing and living areas," states a report from generalpattonmuseum.com. "Sand was everywhere. It found its way into food, water, weapons, engines, bedrolls, clothing, tents, and troop's eyes and mouths."

At full strength, CAMA had 10 divisional camps, from HQ at Camp Young to the west, Camp Isis north of Needles, Calif. To the north, Camp Bouse in Arizona to the east and camps Laguna, Horn and Hyder along the Arizona-Mexico border. This land mass

was 350 miles wide and 250 miles deep.

"The plan was that each division and/or major unit would train in its own area, and near the end of its training period would participate in a corps exercise in the corps maneuvering area at Palen Pass," states a report by California State Military Museum staff. Palen Pass is a rugged and remote area northwest of Blythe, Calif.


To boost morale and aid in communication, Patton used his own money to buy commercial radio equipment and set up a radio station for all of CAMA.

"The station broadcast music and news most of the time except when Patton wanted to address the troops," states a report by the California State Military Department. "He kept a microphone at his desk and another by his bed and broke into the programming whenever it suited him."

In August, 1942, less than five months after breaking ground on the Desert Training Center, Patton was called away to lead Operation Torch, the campaign to fight Rommel's German forces in North Africa. The new commander in the training center was Major General Alvin Gillem, Jr., who, with successors, oversaw its growth to handle almost 200,000 troops at a time. Patton wrote about desert training for his successors in his book *Notes of Tactics and Techniques of Desert Warfare*.

While in North Africa, Patton was known to get his troops in line by threatening to send them back to the DTC if they did not shape up.

For two years, CAMA trained troops in desert warfare by the thousands, typically in six-week rotations. By May of 1944, CAMA had achieved its purpose and was shut down. Rommel was defeated, and CAMA's troops and equipment were needed overseas. All that remains of its 10 camp sites are some building foundations, streets, sidewalks and remnants of trash dumps.

Its headquarters, Camp Young, has a few other artifacts and sites preserved as part of the General Patton Memorial Museum (see sidebar.) In most areas of its vast territory, only a few tank tracks and concrete foundations remain as mute testimony to the land's vital role in World War II history. 

A Visit to the Patton Museum

Patton's legacy in the desert can be explored every day at a museum in his honor.

Business owner Joseph Chiriaco donated land at the former entrance to Camp Young, headquarters of the Desert Training Center where Patton trained his troops.

In 1988, private donors opened the General Patton Memorial Museum on the site.

At the main entrance stands a statue of General Patton next to his famous dog Willy. Nearby is a memorial to service members from the west coast who lost their lives in Vietnam.

Inside the building, an impressive array of war memorabilia is arranged around a Willys Jeep and a small theater for viewing a 26-minute documentary movie on Patton's training center in the desert, available on DVD and VHS tape along with numerous books.

Displays showing armament, equipment, supplies and memorabilia dot the walls and display cases. Such items as a replica of Patton's

ivory-handled revolvers, Nazi swords and guns, code encrypting devices, radios, saddles and other cavalry gear, and tins of rations can be examined up close. As well, an impressive array of scale model airplanes from World War II and more recent conflicts are on display.

Outside the building, the stone remains of a chapel where soldiers held religious ceremonies stands next to an assortment of tanks. They range from a World War II-era Sherman tank, like the ones Patton's tank divisions employed, to an amphibious troop carrier and more modern Patton tanks.

The General Patton Memorial Museum is on Interstate 10, exit 173, 30 miles east of Indio. Open 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily except Thanksgiving and Christmas. Admission is \$4 for adults or \$3.50 for seniors. Service members in uniform and kids 12 and under get in free.

For details, visit generalpattonmuseum.com or call 760-227-3483.

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