

From reviews of the first edition:

“Patton's Oracle is a deeply personal account as the author recounts working with the humble, loyal and compassionate Koch as the old soldier is in a race against time, battling his terminal illness while attempting to complete and publish his book on tactical intelligence which he feels as his last professional responsibility.”

—*Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin*

“He [Oscar Koch] had suffered the bad reputation of intelligence officers and often quoted General Omar Bradley on the subject: ‘Misfits frequently found themselves assigned to intelligence duties.’ Koch was the exception. Patton's Oracle explains why.”

—*Journal of the American Intelligence Professional*

“When I finish a book with tears in my eyes, as I just did with a work by Robert Hays, Patton's Oracle: Gen. Oscar Koch, as I knew Him . . . I know I've experienced great writing. ... If you're a World War II history buff, Hays' book is must reading. It's a highly moving tribute to a great man by a friend whose life was enriched by the friendship.”

—Huntington News Net

Other voices:

“I found that researching Patton through the eyes and actions of Oscar Koch was the most satisfactory approach to understanding Third Army in the Bulge.”

—Peter Caddick-Adams (author, *Snow & Steel, the Battle of the Bulge, 1944–45*) to Robert Hays.

“Koch was the perfect G-2 for Patton, calm, deliberate, and just the right personality to interact with his volatile boss.”

—Carlo D’Este, (author, *Patton, A Genius for War*) to
Robert Hays.

“Always he [Patton] had available in Koch’s War Room the estimates of the situation of which was probably, in the field of intelligence, the most penetrating brain in the American Army.”

—*Patton, a Study in Command*, Hubert Essame.

Patton's Oracle

Gen. Oscar Koch, as I Knew Him

Biographical Memoir

by Robert Hays

Patton's Oracle: General Oscar Koch, as I Knew Him
A biographical memoir by Robert Hays 2nd Edition

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Cover photo: Photo depicts Oscar Koch as Assistant Division Commander of the 25th Infantry Division in 1954. From MIPB: Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin, Michael P. Ley, editor. U.S. Army Intelligence Center (Fort Huachuca, AZ), publisher. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023934301

1. Nonfiction. 2. Biography

ISBN 13: 978-1-950750-50-4

ISBN 10: 1-950750-50-7

2nd Edition printing, 2023

Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC Deltona, Florida

United States of America

Contact the publisher at TJPub@thomas-jacobpublishing.com

This book is dedicated to every man and woman
who has served in the Armed Forces
of the United States of America.

“Koch is the greatest G-2 in the U.S. Army. His record is without equal in every phase of intelligence.”

—Robert S. Allen, *Lucky Forward*

Foreword

“Study history, study history. In history lie all the secrets of statecraft.”

—Winston Spencer Churchill

GENERAL OSCAR KOCH is regarded as one of the most respected and impactful intelligence officers the U.S. Army has ever known, but for many years the true significance of his service to his country and his lasting impact on the broad field of intelligence was not widely understood outside of the Army intelligence community. This interesting and insightful biographical memoir honors and salutes this humble and proud American hero, and goes far toward closing that gap.

Oscar Koch’s extraordinary military career began in 1915 and spanned service in the Mexican Expedition (General John J. Pershing’s pursuit of the famed Mexican revolutionary and guerrilla leader, Pancho Villa) in 1917, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Cold War. He retired in 1954 after achieving every rank from private to brigadier general during his nearly four decades as a soldier. He had served in units ranging from horse cavalry to

the introduction of tanks and modern mechanized forces.

His most significant career role, as the reader will see, commenced when he was hand-picked as General George S. Patton Jr.'s G-2 (intelligence officer). In the summer of 1942, when he was a 45-year-old lieutenant colonel, Patton asked him to join his staff for what would be known as Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of North Africa. Patton knew Koch well. The two had become friends at Fort Riley, Kansas, and in 1940 Koch was named inspector general of Patton's 2nd Armored Division at Fort Benning, Georgia.

In the North African invasion, Koch served as chief of staff for sub-taskforce Blackstone, one of the three major units of Patton's 32,000-troop command. Not long after that he became Patton's G-2. For the rest of World War II, his meticulous attention to detail and implementation of processes became a force multiplier for Patton, and his superb and innovative performance in that critical intelligence role led to him being regarded as the best G-2 in the U.S. Army.

The contributions of Oscar Koch to the Army and the nation did not end with World War II. He remained on active duty through a variety of important roles, including founding and command of the Army's first intelligence school at Fort Riley, command of the 25th Infantry Division in Korea, and key Cold War intelligence assignments.

General Koch was posthumously inducted into the Military Intelligence Hall of Fame in 1993. Koch Barracks at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, home of the U.S. Army Intelligence School, was named in his honor the same year.

His Hall of Fame citation states: "BG Koch did more for

the development of combat intelligence than any other American intelligence officer, prior to or during WWII.” Three paragraphs that follow list and enumerate the procedures and processes he developed and refined, many of which are still in use today.

In reference to General Koch’s book, *G-2: Intelligence for Patton*, the citation declares it “may have been his greatest contribution to the Military Intelligence Corps. More than simply a memoir, the book was a tutorial for successful intelligence officers.”

There can be little doubt that the movie, “Patton,” released in 1970, had and still has a great deal of effect on the public perception of General George S. Patton Jr. It received great acclaim. But it has notable inaccuracies, and the author points out the great personal disservice it does to Oscar Koch.

He writes that Frank McCarthy, one of the producers, sent General Koch a letter enclosing portions of the movie script attributed to him as Patton’s G-2 and asking him to sign off on the script. The inaccuracies were such that the general wrote back saying he could not approve these in their current form, but offered to make modifications. He got no response.

Lacking General Koch’s essential approval, Patton’s intelligence officer became a fictional character in the movie, without significant changes in the script. The opportunity to publicly proclaim and highlight the exceptional work of Patton’s G-2 and his team was lost.

Robert Hays developed this fascinating biographical memoir during a series of personal meetings with General Koch in Carbondale, Illinois, based on the mutual respect

ROBERT HAYS

of “soldier to soldier” conversations. He offers a deeply personal account of their relationship, and the character and nature of General Oscar Koch, especially his pride in and concerns about the intelligence field. He does a masterful job of revealing the character attributes which make the Oscar Koch story such a compelling one: grace, respect, discipline, humility, humor, and empathy.

Those character attributes inspired the confidence of General Patton and the entire staff, enabling Oscar Koch’s impactful innovations as an intelligence officer. The reader will find this work to be a comprehensive account of those accomplishments and a fitting tribute to an exceptional American soldier and citizen.

—Maj. Brock Ayers, Military Intelligence Branch,
U.S. Army (ret).

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 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: "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 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 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 said.

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 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 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 protesters, the newspaper said 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 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 he spent two years near the end of his military career on a virtually clandestine assignment to the 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 he would have been particularly forthcoming on that experience, either.

This is not to say he was reluctant to answer my questions. It merely is an acknowledgment of the fact 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.

My first meeting with the general was little more than happenstance. I was a new and terribly green public relations writer for Southern Illinois University in Carbondale,

where the chancellor, always sensitive to town-and-gown relationships, had promised to help a local civic group promote its activities. This meant the services of someone from the PR office, and to my very good fortune that someone turned out to be me. Merely the luck of the draw—or maybe I was the only one not busy that day.

In any case, I was to meet a retired brigadier general at the home of a war widow, Mrs. Burrell Smith. Mrs. Smith wanted to present the flag that had draped her husband's coffin to a national flag bank organized by the Carbondale Memorial Day Association. Her husband was a veteran of World War I.

The retired one-star general turned out to be Oscar Koch, the association's executive director. His work with the association was voluntary and, I would learn in the coming weeks, typical of the way he chose to spend his time. He had moved to Carbondale in retirement because it was the family home of his wife, Nannie Caldwell Koch.

The general and I arrived at exactly the same moment at Mrs. Smith's home, a modest, well-kept white clapboard house which sat squarely between one of Carbondale's old, brick-paved streets and the embanked right-of-way of the Illinois Central Railroad tracks. He introduced himself and joked that our timing was perfect; we might be "kicking off a military operation." He admired punctuality. We were off to a good start.

Mrs. Smith was somewhat misty-eyed as she presented General Koch with her flag. But she said she would be grateful if it could be put to some proper use "rather than just be hidden away in a dresser drawer until I die." He clearly was impressed by the reverence with which she

handled the flag and promised that, beginning on Memorial Day, it would fly over the city's Woodlawn Cemetery. He told her the flag eventually would be disposed of in a proper manner.

The general asked about her late husband, James Benjamin "Candy" Smith, a major league baseball player with the Chicago White Sox and the Detroit Tigers. Her husband apparently had been a great storyteller, and she repeated for us some of his best anecdotes. Most of her stories were from his days with the Tigers when that team was managed by the famed Ty Cobb.

The general laughed heartily and I could see this helped put Mrs. Smith at ease. What had begun as a solemn occasion turned into a pleasant visit that stretched into more than a full hour. I took photos of the flag presentation and wrote a news story to be distributed by the university news service. Both the news report and a picture were picked up by several area newspapers. The general let me know he was pleased with the publicity for the flag bank and, more important, for the Memorial Day Association.

Before this assignment, I never had heard the name Oscar Koch. I knew nothing about him beyond the fact he was a retired U.S. Army general. This was daunting enough. As a draftee, specialist third-class regimental special orders clerk, my military service had not included much rubbing of elbows with generals. I seldom had contact with anyone who ranked above captain, and had I not been responsible for maintaining the duty roster for field-grade officers—majors through colonels—I hardly would have been aware we had all this higher brass in the regiment.

The one occasion on which I did associate with the battalion commanders turned out a bit awkwardly. I was on charge-of-quarters duty and had to call each of them individually at 3 a.m. and advise them of a post-wide alert exercise. One colonel asked, "What the hell am I supposed to do?" I didn't know. For another one I had a wrong number and woke a stranger in the night. She was not pleased.

None of this did much to salve my pervasive unease with high-ranking officers.

If I had known that Oscar Koch had been a key member of Patton's staff, I might have been even more intimidated. Nobody thought of Patton as a pussycat. Why should I expect one of his hand-picked staff officers to be any different?

I couldn't have been more wrong.

General Koch was a robust man, immaculately groomed, and he wore a broad smile. I was surprised by his pleasant, down-to-earth manner. This was a general? I didn't know it then, but Oscar Koch was a soldier who rose from private to brigadier general the hard way, passing through every intervening enlisted and commissioned rank that existed at the time. He clearly had earned his star.

He soon learned I was a veteran, too, and readily accepted the fact that we had this in common. He honored those who had served; rank apparently was not especially important.

I had met a great many interesting people in my work as a newspaper reporter and university public relations writer. None had been more interesting than Oscar Koch. I found him a joy to work with.

This was not a man who lived in the past. He faced his days with good humor and exuberance and, although I

think he would have been content wherever his feet touched the ground, he relished the tranquility of small-town life and the serenity he found in the natural beauty of the rolling southern Illinois countryside with its miles of peach and apple orchards and nearby Shawnee National Forest.

General Koch was my senior by many years, but nonetheless as energetic as I was and ready to devote himself to virtually any worthy cause. He was, as Patton might have said, “a doer, not a talker.”

Our relationship was positive from that first meeting. There were more projects coming up that the Memorial Day Association needed publicity for, and the general apparently reported back to the chancellor that he would be pleased to continue to work with me. For my part, I was grateful I had been volunteered.

I spent a great deal of time with Oscar Koch in the coming weeks and did what I could to help his organization in its drive to gain recognition for Carbondale as the site of the nation’s first formal Memorial Day celebration. This claim was based on an observance that occurred in 1866 in the city’s Woodlawn Cemetery, which holds the graves of twenty-two Civil War veterans. Monuments in the cemetery, a peaceful, wooded hilltop, identify both Union and Confederate troops and include one that marks the final resting place of an unknown soldier.

The speaker that day a hundred years earlier was General John A. Logan. General Logan was a native of Jackson County, where Carbondale is located, and a national Civil War hero. He gained a reputation as one of the Union Army’s most capable leaders and after the war went on to

become head of the Grand Army of the Republic, an influential national veterans' organization.⁴ Two years after the Carbondale ceremony, General Logan issued his famous GAR General Orders No. 11 calling for May 30, 1868, to be a day devoted to "strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land."

His proclamation was broadly accepted and led to widespread observance of what at first was called Decoration Day. This later was changed to Memorial Day.

As a highlight of its promotion, the Carbondale Memorial Day Association organized a centennial observance of the 1866 Woodlawn Cemetery event. Most of the planning load was carried by General Oscar Koch. The work hardly could have been in more capable or more willing hands.

On a beautiful spring morning, color guards led a parade through town to the cemetery, where there was a wreath-laying at the grave of the unknown soldier and a formal reading of Logan's 1868 GAR General Orders No. 11. The featured speaker was Chaplain Ernest C. Klein of the U.S. Army Reserve 12th Special Forces "Green Beret" unit, a combat infantryman and senior parachutist with the 95th Division in World War II. Clyde Choate, a member of the Illinois General Assembly and World War II Medal of Honor winner, presented a flag to the national flag bank.⁵

I would have been there anyway, of course, but I was hired to report on the day's activities as a correspondent for the United Press International wire service. I took such stringer assignments from both the UPI and the Associated

Press because I hated to turn down the money, and also because I wanted to stay on their good side. The wire services were important outlets for our PR efforts and we tried hard not to alienate them. The money wasn't much; on this day I was paid six dollars for a half-day's work. The AP paid about the same.

The celebration featured performances by a church choral group, a high school band, and the Southern Illinois University Concert Band. The music was at the same time somber and stirring, appropriate to the occasion, a tribute to those who had given their lives for our country and a call to patriotism. I thought about the cheerful tone of a recording by Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass I had been listening to earlier on the car radio and marveled at the wondrous suppleness of music, which surely has something fitting to offer in any circumstance.

A bugler and a ceremonial firing squad brought a stunning end to the centennial reenactment. I saw tears in the eyes of many in the modest-sized crowd of people, mostly the older citizens, who had come out to witness the commemoration. And pride on their faces. These were people who loved their country and honored the men and women of the armed forces who had been called to its service. They would have known about Patton, but I wondered how many were familiar with the remarkable record of Oscar Koch.

The Woodlawn Cemetery centennial celebration struck me as beautifully serene and in every sense fitting. I sought out General Koch as the ceremonies drew to a close, expecting to find him exhausted after his busy day. If he was tired at all, it didn't show.

"Was it good?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir. It was good." And I truly believed it was.

This story might end here were it not for John W. Allen, who was president of the Memorial Day Association. He was close to the general in age and the two of them had been good friends for some years, beginning well before they got involved with the Memorial Day Association.

I knew John Allen from my days as an undergraduate journalism student. A past Illinois State Historical Society president and Illinois state “Historian of the Year” in 1955, he was a fascinating storyteller whose weekly columns on regional history were distributed by the Southern Illinois University news bureau. I worked there part time, and one of the pleasures of my job had been editing his colorful stories. He never failed to express his gratitude for my modest contribution and showed me the same level of respect then as he did now that I was a professional staff member in this same unit.

I think it would have been some time before General Oscar Koch, reserved as he was when talking about himself, would have told me the things John Allen had learned through their long relationship—things which John Allen, in turn, told me. These included the fact that the general had saved his own intelligence reports from the Patton commands and had them stashed away in old Army footlockers in his basement. On retirement from the Army he’d been granted a Guggenheim Fellowship to support research for and writing of a text book on combat intelligence. He studied documents in the German military archives to see how the information in his reports measured up when compared to the actual German records. The general had written a book on combat intelligence, but the manuscript had been rejected by several publishers. He’d recently been back at work on revisions and still hoped to see his book in print.

None of this surprised me. I had come to recognize that Oscar Koch was a studious man who believed strongly in the importance of the field in which he specialized. What I did not realize as yet was that it reasonably could be argued he was the best intelligence officer in U.S. Army history.

John Allen's revelations had piqued my interest in Oscar Koch even more. I was eager to get started on the article I had promised the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. This modest, unassuming man plainly was an unsung hero of World War II and it was high time he gained some recognition.