

RECREATING HISTORY

General Patton's Dodge Command Car



*Written by MVPA Texas members Denny Hair, #9986,
Steve Hickamn, 33923, Ken Rose, #24810,
and Carlos Manning, #10401*



For quite a few years MVPA member Denny Hair had known about a Dodge WC57 stored on a ranch in LaVernia, Texas. The owner, Bill Wiseman, was always going to restore it but just had too many projects on hand. Bill, a good friend of Denny Hair and Carlos Manning, are all members of the *Patton Third Army Living Historians*.



After viewing some photographs, completing negotiations, with all agreeing, the command car finally changed hands. There was good reason to want this particular Dodge command car; it was the exact model and year of General George S. Patton Jr.'s car that he used at various times when commanding the 3rd US Army in Europe. Denny has portrayed General Patton in the U.S. and abroad and appeared at the request of the US Army to portray him in Heidelberg, Germany on the 64th anniversary of his death (see *Army Motors* #131). The *Patton Third Army Living Historians* thought recreating the WC57 into an exact duplicate of Patton's original Dodge command car would be great restoration project.



A LITTLE HISTORY

General Patton was picked to command the 3rd US Army by General Eisenhower and ordered to England. When he arrived in Prestwick, Scotland on the morning of January 26, 1944 he proceeded immediately to London. When he called on General Eisenhower he was told he would be given command of the American 3rd US Army. (Blumenson, Martin. *The Patton Papers*, Vol. 2 pg. 408)

General Patton was fond of the Dodge Command and Reconnaissance Cars and had previously used a 1/2-ton command car during desert training in the southwestern US states. In North Africa and Sicily he used a WC56 command car. Patton was fearless but not foolhardy. He was

well aware that command cars were unique in their silhouette and could easily be spotted by the Germans in Europe by both air and ground reconnaissance. For that reason alone most generals opted out of using them; many preferred a jeep, as they were less conspicuous. Patton felt to show fear as an officer was a deterrent to good morale and that a commanding general should not show fear or cower down. He chose to continue to use a command car and had a Dodge WC57 modified in England to his own specification. It should be noted he also rode in a jeep and a Ford M20 armored scout car, so his choice of vehicles depended on his needs.



Patton used a WC56 in Sicily but did not have it shipped to England for use with 3rd Army.

THE ORIGINAL MODIFICATIONS

Thanks to the US Ordnance Department, and an alert US Signal Corps that understood the historical significance of such modifications they had photographs made. The original photographs used here are from the National Archives and have appeared in several publications over the years. It was from these photographs that the recreation of this famous command car was attempted.*

The Dodge WC57 is a 3/4-ton Command and Reconnaissance Car and came from the factory with a winch and a radio switch box located behind the front seat on the passenger side. It operates on a 12-volt electrical system.

The first modification was the addition of an armor plate that would pivot to protect the radiator and deflect ground fire from penetrating it. It worked off the oblique principal; being sloped it could divert shrapnel and small arms fire away from the radiator. Patton had previously been in the thick of combat and often had shells exploding near him. He thought this concept would help protect the vehicle. Intelligence reports and aerial photographs of Europe showed that it was heavily mined in places. Therefore the rear floorboard of the command car was covered with 1/2-inch steel armor plate cannibalized with scrap metal from another vehicle in a salvage yard. He now had two potential threats covered with these modifications. Since he knew, if spotted, he would be a target from the air; he added a .50 caliber heavy machine gun for return fire. A WC57 has almost no rear storage space so a



Top. The original dash on the Dodge WC57, as found, sitting outside where weather had taken a toll. Standing water and leaves had collected on the floorboards. We were lucky that rust was minimal.

Middle. The engine before rebuild. To determine where we were at with the restoration we power washed the engine and frame. It had years of grease, dirt and crude covering it.

Bottom. Right engine side. The engine and compartment looked to be basically all there with no major modifications. We did not know whether it would run.

This is by far the rarest photograph known of General Patton in his command car. It was taken in England, at Peover Hall, Nutsford, Cheshire, along the side of the road leading to the mansion that had General Patton Headquarters in the Spring of 1944. The photograph was top secret as Patton's Third army was a secret and the vehicle was clearly marked. It was released by General Patton to



his men after the war as a sovenier. The Driver is MSgt. John L. Mims who drove Patton all through the war.

rear tailgate was taken from a Dodge weapons carrier and installed with a swivel hinge on the rear of the command car.

General Patton believed in announcing his presence by letting his men know he was with them at the front, which he constantly visited regardless of where that front was. To announce his impending arrival, for those near and far, he had installed two large air horns and a siren, which was used frequently. In fact all his vehicles had the same set up.

Since Patton believed the commanding general should not only be heard but also identified as such, he had placed two large metal flags on the front grille of all his vehicles. On the driver's side was the insignia of 3rd US Army and on the passenger side his rank as a three star general. He had achieved the rank of lieutenant general when the command car was modified in England and was promoted to full general (four star) shortly before the end of the war.

Patton loved the pageantry, pomp, and privileges of rank. He never failed to display those insignias so he had metal plates displaying his rank placed on both the front and rear of his vehicles. The plates were painted red as per regulation and with large silver stars, often much larger than most and displayed on both the front and back, which

was unusual. On his command car they were most certainly larger than on his other vehicles.

Finally, he would often stand in the rear of the command car and address his troops. He had a rail placed on the back of the front seat so when standing he had something to hold.



This picture was taken on the same day and time in England as the larger one. This was one of Patton's favorites and he often autographed them on request from friends.



National Archives images of Patton's WC57 during modification. England, US Army Ordnance Depot, spring 1944.

General Patton was fond of the .50 cal. M2 heavy barrel machinegun. He had one mounted on the side of his Command Car. It took a considerable effort by the US Army Ordnance depot to mount it so it would function and not vibrate itself lose when firing.



THE RESTORATION AND MODIFICATION

Many thanks go to Bill Wiseman who found a WC57 several years ago and tucked it away in his barn as a future restoration project. Time passed and the other projects came into play. Denny Hair first saw the command car in LaVernia, Texas in the late 1990s and asked if it was for sale. Bill told him he would keep him in mind but it was not for sale then. Years passed. Since Denny is now known as General Patton in parts of Europe and many places in the U.S.A. the *Patton Third Army Living Historians*, thought this would be a great project to restore. They previously had immense success with recreating a Patton Headquarters Van (see *Army Motors* #127) and thought this would be a great addition to their presentations.

Bill Wiseman and Denny made the deal in March of 2010 and then the work began. The command car had a great many challenges than first anticipated, but a determined group of restorers can do most anything when they get serious. In April of 2010 the work of disassembly took place. Several weekends of taking it apart, making photographs and cataloging everything eventually brought the project to the second stage. The parts were cleaned then evaluated. Some would need to be sandblasted, which can be tricky.

All the larger and heavy parts were blasted and primed. The engine was taken to a professional rebuild shop in Richmond, Texas where it received a complete overhaul. Simultaneously the larger parts were sandblasted, as well as the frame, and primed elsewhere. The generator and regulator were completely rebuilt. Carlos Manning, who is no stranger to MVs, was the overall project manager. He is the Chief of Staff for the Patton Third Army Living Historians, and is our grandfather figure, has helped so many people it would take too long to list them all. We love him and are grateful for all of his help.

Dodge Command Cars are extremely popular and locating parts is becoming hard. Denny contacted Midwest Military, known for their great restorations and vast number of different NOS and reproduction Dodge parts. John Bizal, the owner, found not only the parts we needed but provided willing and professional advice. He went out of his way to answer questions, find parts, and helped whenever he could. Not only did a great many of the parts come from him, he was also contracted to redo the seats in real leather. General Patton would have approved of his finished product, as the seats were perfect. After the *Patton Third Army Living*



Front right engine. The engine compartment was assembled then the engine was then fired up and fine-tuned before the body was reassembled.

Historians had proceeded as far as they could, the command car was ready for the long reassembly process. Many thanks go to those in the group who helped.

Enter Steve Hickman. Both Steve and Denny Hair are neighbors and both are on the Board of Directors for the *Museum of the American GI*. Steve is a master welder and has won top awards for his restoration of antique and military vehicles. He saw the need to help and was assigned to be the project completion manager for the last phase of the restoration of the command car.



The floorboard, forward of the rear seat were serviceable and after sandblasting it came out well.



Rear view of engine. Once the engine and chassis was rebuilt and assembled, we matched the existing paint scheme from samples taken before the restoration.

Steve then took over the restoration from that point. The frame was painted, the brakes completely overhauled and synthetic DOT 5 silicone brake fluid was used. It does not absorb moisture and is worth the extra cost. Steve painted and mounted the engine. Strict attention was paid to color codes and the frame-up restoration came together.

Rebuilding the WC57 Dodge command car, approximating General Patton's, was challenging on several levels. Steve labored hours over the replacement of a few key pieces of the rear of the floor and cut and rewelded the rear portion of the floor that had been damaged by rust. The reproduction parts used on this restoration were all purchased from Mid West Military. Some years before the command car had been hit hard from the rear and it took quite a bit of work to straighten it. This took many hours and was very time-consuming. It paid off as there are no dings and all the metal is now straight.

In December 2010, the parts gradually began to find their way back to where they once were, but now fully straightened, restored to original specs and painted. The uniqueness of the Patton command car now came into play. Just restoring the WC57 back to factory specs would only get us to what Patton started with before he had it modified.

Air horns were almost never used on WWII vehicles, unless your name was George Patton – he loved them and had them on all his vehicles. A set of the correct size air horns were found at *Air Horns of Texas* and then the really hard part came. Steve had to figure out a way to make them work and do what has not been done to a command car since WWII. He figured it out and... well; we'll keep that a secret for now. Suffice to say, they work and are very loud; Patton would have loved them. The next big



Original front view taken in England after modification with air horns. The 3rd Army flag was not painted, as Patton's command of Third Army was still a top secret due to Operation Fortitude and Patton heading a fake army intended to invade Calais, France.

problem was mounting of the .50 cal. M2 post on the passenger side. A .50 cal. has a lot of weight and to mount one that could be fired without the mount coming loose took a lot a thought. The inside panels were reinforced near the passenger side and the bolting system was modified near the driver's side entrance.



General Patton's rank and army flags were painted on all his command vehicles. We found one photograph of the four star rank which we used to honor him.



US Army Ordnance added the rear tailgate in 1944. They used a 3/4-ton Weapons Carrier tailgate. So did likewise.

The vehicle markings were exactly replicated from actual photographs of the original Command Car.



The WC57 modified reproduction Command Car of General Patton's as it appeared in July 1945.

Next came the addition of the radiator's armor plate, which is hinged and swivels up and down. John Deere has an identical part for their 2240 tractor that controls and locks the up and down motion of three point connection. A look through the catalog found an exact match to the swivel locks.

The last major modification came at the rear of the command car. The US Army Ordnance Corps unit in England attached a Dodge weapons carrier tailgate to the rear of the command car. Installing it in the right place was difficult since all Steve had to go on was a photograph provided by Denny. There were no plans but a lot of study produced great results.

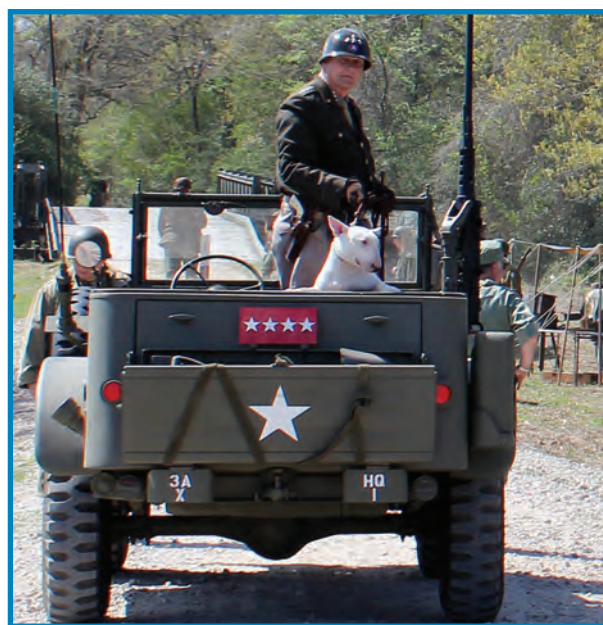
The final steps included fabricating the general's four-star rank plates. John Bizal came through with them. We were finally ready for the stencils. A call to Rick Larsen Military Stencils was made. He was sent photographs of the original command car markings and we got back excellent stencils. Though General George Patton spent most of the war as a lieutenant general (three star), towards the end of the war he was promoted to full general and we included the fourth star in honor of the last rank he held.

A SCR 508 radio was added to the command car. The WC57 we acquired was radio equipped as evidenced by numerous mountings in the vehicle. So when the command car was modified to replicate General Patton's car a decision was made to include the radio. There are no known photographs of his command car with a radio installation so he may or may not have had one.

The completed WC57 General Patton command car made its debut at the March 2011 open house of the Museum of the American G.I. just one year from its acquisition. Many thanks to those mentioned and to the *Patton Third Army Living Historians*, who are dedicated in honoring our veterans through teaching history and keeping the memory alive through such restoration projects.



Denny Hair as General Patton with his English Bull Terrier 'Willie' at the 'Museum of the American GI' where the Command Car debuted in March 2011.



* Special request, if you are in possession of any original or copies of Patton in his command car that differ from those published, please contact Denny Hair at <denny@mss blue.net>

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