Preserving The Legacy of World War II Stories: A Conversation with Alex Kershaw

Thomas Bowie

New York Times bestselling author Alex Kershaw is the author of twelve books on the Second World War, including bestsellers such as *The Bedford Boys*, *The Longest Winter*, *The First Wave*, *The Liberator*, *Against All Odds* and *Patton's Prayer*. Born and educated in the United Kingdom, Alex moved to the United States in 1994. He has devoted much of his professional life to preserving stories and memories of the Greatest Generation. The resident historian for Friends of the National World War II Memorial in Washington, DC, Alex speaks frequently on the war and for many years has guided tours to key battlefield locations and historic sites. He just returned from a "final victory" tour of Germany and the Czech Republic as he marked the eightieth anniversary of the end of the war in Europe with a group of supporters in a week-long act of remembrance, making the mission of the Friends his own—"teaching the lessons of yesterday . . . uniting generations of tomorrow." Alex has spent almost thirty years bringing the stories of the war in Europe alive.

Alex Kershaw
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Thomas Bowie (TB): Alex, let us start with your extraordinary dedication to this subject, to the men and women who sacrificed so much to

preserve democracy—to their stories of courage, of faith, of perseverance, of heroism, of leadership. What inspired you to get involved with these stories and why stick with them for thirty years?

Alex Kershaw (AK): I have always been interested in World War II, obviously. I was a journalist for a long time, and when I discovered I could actually go and interview people who were there at key moments in World War II as a journalist, then my two passions—for journalism, which I still have, and my interest in history—they came together. Although I have looked for other subjects to write about, I am always drawn back to World War II because the stories are so powerful, and they are really fun to write about. I have spent almost three decades now continuing to write about them. The stories resonate still with me and that is *it*, really. I mean they are great stories. First as a journalist, then for the next twenty years, I spent most of my time interviewing veterans and they became the primary sources for my books. So even though I'm spending a lot more time in archives now, I still really enjoy meeting, here and there, ninety-nine-year-old guys who were actually there on, you know, Omaha Beach or crossing the Rhine, and so on.

TB: I want to focus specifically on a couple of those stories. As you look back over your impressive body of work, these dozen books that really capture the different dimensions of the war, what stands out? We will turn in just a minute to your most recent books, *Against All Odds* and *Patton's Prayer*. But as you go back to the earlier work, are there a couple of those books that are your favorites? I know I am asking you to pick among your children here, but I mean, is there one or two that stand out?

AK: Well, I have to say perhaps the most impactful book in terms of its value to readers and a community and its impact on my life was the *Bedford Boys*, which came out in 2003. It is the story of the Virginia community of Bedford that lost nineteen guys in the first wave on Omaha Beach.

In the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, if you watch the first twenty minutes, they recreate what happened to the Bedford Boys. That was my first proper World War II book. I had written two books before that, two biographies, one of Jack London and one of Robert Capa, the war photographer. But that was my first proper World War II book. It did pretty well, and it started my career writing books about World War II, and it connected me to the United States. You know, I had been in the US less than a decade when I started to write that book, spending a lot of time in Bedford, Virginia, in Bedford County, Virginia, doing the research. Over the last twenty years, it has become a kind of touchstone for me, a place where I can go and celebrate and honor and really think about the sacrifice of that one community. It has been a wonderfully meaningful experience. I mean, if I look at all my books—I have written twelve now about World War II—the one I am proudest of in a way is the *Bedford Boys*, because it means so much to that community, to the families. It personified, humanized the sacrifice on D-Day, the personal stories of D-Day in a way that I'm told—this is not me, but I am told—does so in a more powerful way than any other book written about D-Day. I would have to say it was maybe not my favorite book, but the one that means most to me.

But there are others. The book that came after that, *The Longest Winter,* was about the Battle of the Bulge, about the most decorated US platoon of World War II. The platoon commander was a guy called Lyle Bouck. He was twenty years old during the Battle of the Bulge. I got to know him pretty well, so I have really fond memories. The books I look back on most

fondly also coincide with the periods in my life where I was young, my son was young, I was playing a lot of football, soccer as you say. I was in my late thirties and there were still a lot of World War II veterans around in the early 2000s. My first book was 2003, *The Bedford Boys* on World War II, and then I was knocking them out every couple of years for about fifteen years: books in 2003, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, and then in 2015. In fact, nearly all those books were heavily based on interviews with veterans.

Actually, that was a decade I spent going all across America—literally everywhere in America—meeting really, really wonderful people. I feel blessed and really lucky I got to do that. It was a great experience.

TB: Absolutely. The National D-Day Memorial is in Bedford, isn't it? Do I have that right? Are you associated with that as well?

AK: I go down there every now and again. I used to go down there pretty much every June the 6th when I was not in Normandy. I have been there for Memorial Day, Veteran's Day. I did a tour of England and Normandy with some veterans also. It is a powerful place. There are no Bedford boys left alive. The last one passed away five or six years ago. There are some relatives left, but it was an amazing place to go. Every time I went there, I would meet with a couple of the Bedford boys who were still around. A guy called Ray Nance was the only surviving officer from Bedford, and then a guy called Roy Stevens was a very important source for me. He lost his identical twin brother on the 6th of June 1944. So he was always there. When I turned up, I would have coffee with him. He would always be at the memorial with me. I felt very connected to that community and I felt like they appreciated what I had done. You know, no one had written about it, written a

book about what that community went through in World War II. *The* Bedford Boys are better known now, and, of course, it is the title of my book. But before that, beforehand, there was no descriptor for what they experienced, no story for those guys who served in World War II. I feel like I did something relatively significant for that community and also for the memorialization of those who fought and died on D-Day.

TB: You travel around the country, actually much of the Western world, sharing stories of these remarkable people, men who before the war were very normal. And you bring this out in *The Bedford Boys*, as well as in your other books. Patton may be the biggest exception to that in terms of your general interest in ordinary soldiers who do extraordinary things in war. But you have talked about a common set of experiences the men tend to share—a blue collar background, often broken homes or tough family circumstances. Almost all went through some kind of severe economic challenge. For you, then, what unites these stories? Why are these stories especially noteworthy and inspirational?

AK: Well, World War II would be the only war I can think of where I feel the amount of death and suffering and tragedy actually was worthwhile. The sacrifice was for a very noble cause, in my eyes anyway. And I have been a direct beneficiary of what these gentlemen and women I write about achieved in the European theatre, certainly. You know, I'm almost sixty, and I belong to a remarkably fortunate generation that has never been drafted, has never had to go to war, has not lived through any kind of significant deprivation or global conflict. The social system I grew up in and benefited from in Britain was a direct result of the political shifts in the United Kingdom coming out of World War II. I did not pay to go to college. I did not pay for healthcare.

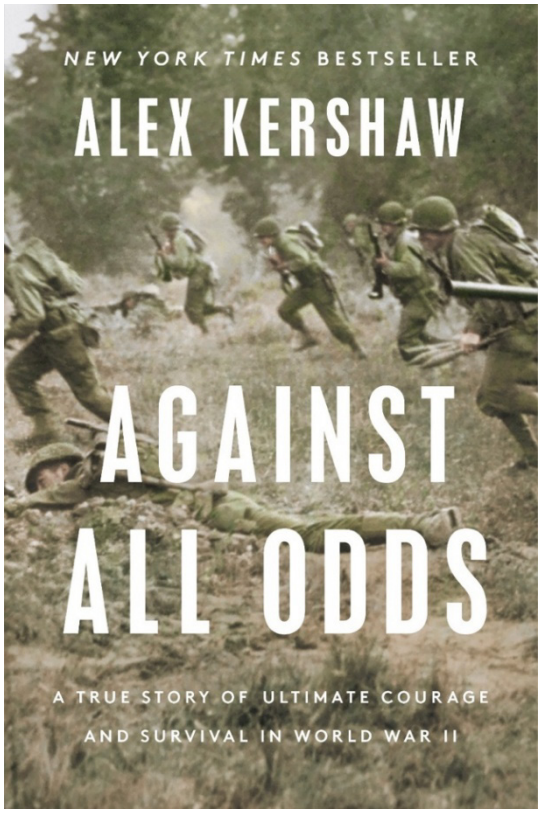
I had what I thought was a very good free public education, and I feel what I benefited from was earned by the sacrifice and valor and grit and resilience of Allied soldiers in World War II. I could add to that by saying I also owe the Red Army a huge debt, but you know I love Europe.

I was there recently for two or three weeks. While there, I was on the bus with twenty-five Americans and I said, "look through the window." We were in Munich and I said, "look through the window of the bus—you are looking at a miracle." This is an incredible country. It has been rebuilt. It is a highly functioning democracy, I would say, and it has a very good social welfare system. Very good higher education system. It is a society which cares about other people within that society. It is not a social Darwinist society. It has learnt a lot from the tragedies of the past. As I said to the people on the bus, this is something Americans can feel proud of. It is something Brits and Canadians, we can all feel proud of, of what Germany is today because we helped. We helped to liberate the Germans from Nazism. We helped to rebuild it. We have protected it. We still protect it, and it is a testimony. There is no better testimony to what the Bedford boys gave their lives for. No better testimony for the 138,000 Americans, nearly all of them working class, for what they gave their lives for. Their legacy is a unified, prosperous, socially democratic Europe that has been at peace (apart from if you count Bosnia and put aside the Ukraine and Bosnia, but certainly Western Central Europe has been at peace) for over eighty years now and that is a phenomenal achievement.

I have concentrated on Europe almost exclusively, with one exception. I wrote a book about the Asia Pacific theatre, about a submarine, the USS *Tang*, which is the most decorated US submarine in history. But that was my only foray into the Asia Pacific war. Every other book is concentrated on mostly small units of Americans fighting in the European theatre in North

Africa, Sicily, Italy, Normandy, all of France, Holland, Belgium. Germany. The liberation of Western Europe has been my major subject from the point of view of American soldiers.

TB: You talked about the sacrifice, the valor, the grit that goes with the ultimate sacrifice in WWII. Let us focus on *Against All Odds: A True Story of Ultimate Courage and Survival in World War II.* In your book, you share the stories of four Medal of Honor winners, all from the same division. Each story is compelling in its own way, and yet the four of them together, spanning what I think you say are over six hundred days of combat, their stories are just remarkable. You chronicle their time in conflict, you narrate the violence they both experienced and (let us be frank) inflicted as well. Then you conclude with their lifelong quest to find some peace in the aftermath. Can you share a little bit about that book and specifically about those major characters?



AK: I became interested in the Medal of Honor because I started to wonder what kind of qualities did soldiers have who earned the Medal of Honor? I do not think anybody ever set out to win the Medal of Honor, but what kind of people actually earn the Medal of Honor? I was fascinated by what they might have in common, or what they did not have in common, and what would motivate them or why they would put their lives in danger repeatedly. Why they would show intrepidity, why they would willingly sacrifice themselves for others. I thought this

was a really a good example of something that is very rare, which is altruism. I thought by looking at it, I could understand how much they were outliers, how much they were unlike everybody else, and I might be able to therefore better understand what the typical experience of combat was for a frontline American soldier in the liberation of Europe.

I did some research, and I came across the 3rd Infantry Division, which has officially 354 days in combat. That was the longest you could spend actually on the front line in combat, 354 days, not in a rest area or on your way to the front, but actually fighting. They had five amphibious invasions, beginning in North Africa in November 1942. The fifth and final amphibious invasion was South of France, Operation Dragoon on the 15th of August 1944, and they went as far as you could possibly go. They had the great honor, the 3rd Infantry Division, of liberating Berchtesgaden. I was there just a couple of weeks ago. They fought from Casablanca to Berchtesgaden, well over two thousand miles. The division of around 12,000 was replaced three times. That is over 36,000 Americans who served in the 3rd Infantry Division. They had the highest fatality rate, highest number of wounded, and by far the highest number of Medal of Honor recipients. Officially they have forty recipients of the Medal of Honor and you can compare that to the 101st Airborne. You know the 101st Airborne from *Band of Brothers* and various other movies and TV shows. They are sort of the glamour boys of World War II, if you like, and 101st Airborne has three recipients, and I think it is 117 days of frontline combat. They have three Medal of Honor recipients, whereas the 3rd Infantry Division has forty.

I thought I would pick the 3rd Infantry Division because if I followed characters from the 3rd Infantry Division from the beginning to the end, then I could tell the story of the liberation of Western Europe, because they were there at the very beginning, day one, and they were there right at the very end, symbolically at the heart of darkness at Berchtesgaden. They had forty

guys who earned the Medal of Honor from the three regiments of the 3rd Infantry Division. I wanted to try and get all my guys to be—you know, ideally as a storyteller—what you would want is all four guys in the same company. That is around two hundred men. That would be ideal. If it were a Hollywood movie, they would all be in the same platoon, you know, four guys out of eighteen or twenty or thirty men. Or at least the same company, or maybe even the same regiment. I ended up with three guys from the same regiment, the 15th Infantry Regiment, which is the most decorated regiment in US military history. It is also one of the oldest, and then I kind of cherry picked another guy from a different regiment, Maurice Britt, because his story was so, so extraordinary and so, so fun to recount. Maurice Britt was from Arkansas. He also played football for the Detroit Lions. By December of 1944, he had done what no other American in World War II had done up until that date, and that was to receive the Bronze Star, the Silver Star, the Distinguished Service Cross and the Medal of Honor, what some people refer to as the "full set." Meaning that was every medal you could gain in combat, and he was the first American to do so. You did not have the Bronze Star in World War One, but it was there in World War II. He was a superstar back in the US. Then he was really badly wounded at Anzio in January 1944. His arm was blown off.

He came back to the US and became a willing propaganda figure, did war bond tours, et cetera. He was this very good looking, very charming, very smart Arkansas boy who had played football for the Razorbacks at the University of Arkansas and the Detroit Lions. He was a superstar on the battlefield. His Medal of Honor citation is like something out of a comic book. It is just extraordinary. Very articulate, very personable, and he became a sort of Captain America figure in late 1944 in the US, who was known as this really remarkable Footsie Britt. He was called Footsie because he had such large feet. I cherry-picked him because he was just a

fantastic story. Also there were primary sources and secondary sources held by the University of Arkansas that were extraordinary. He did a lot of press releases, a lot of very detailed articles he either co-authored or was interviewed for. There was just a wealth of material, tons and tons of dialogue that I was able to use, which I always get very excited about.

And then the other three were from the 15th Infantry Regiment. I had Audie Murphy. I could not *not* write about Audie Murphy because I wanted someone who was recognizable to the audience. A lot of people have heard of Audie Murphy. He is the most decorated soldier, US soldier from World War II. In March of 1945, he equaled Britt's record and, because of other awards he received—if you add a few, if you give each medal a number of points—then he beat Maurice Britt when he earned the Medal of Honor in January of 1945. He got official notification he was going to receive the Medal of Honor in March of 1945, was taken off the line because Medal of Honor recipients were too valuable as propaganda figures to waste on the front lines. He received the Medal of Honor in June of 1945 in Salzburg, and he was still just twenty years old. With Audie Murphy, I focused on him because people have heard of Audie Murphy, and I wanted people to at least recognize one of my characters.

Another guy was an outlier in the sense he did not conform to the background I found a lot of these guys had in common. That was Michael Daly. He was upper middle class. His father was a successful banker and Wall Street figure. He grew up in Connecticut. He was a West Point dropout who joined the First Infantry Division as a private. His first day of combat was the 6th of June 1944 on Omaha Beach, and then he was transferred from the Big Red One to the 3rd Infantry Division to the 5th Regiment of the 3rd Infantry Division in late December of 1944. Everybody apart from Daly, thus Maurice Britt from Arkansas, Audie Murphy from Texas, Keith Ware from California, three of the four had quite a bit in common. And that was they grew up in

extreme poverty. They lost a father in their early teens or when they were boys. They took on what today might seem extraordinary responsibility at a very young age. They were out working jobs when they were not at school from the age of ten or twelve onward. They struggled through the depression. They supported their mothers. They supported large families. By large, I mean at least four siblings, and they really did not have any experience of anything other than hardship. There was no question they had to be resilient. They were just survivors, and they were the products of communities and a time where you had to be resilient. Otherwise, you starved or you did not put food on the table.

They had another thing in common, which I really admired greatly, and that was they were selfless. They automatically thought about their family or other people immediately connected to them because they were responsible for them. In combat these factors produced exceptional warriors and leaders. They were very resilient. They could deal with the hardship of combat. They had suffered great grief in their lives at an early age, so they were not as impacted or rather as debilitated by the loss of life around them as others. They could endure it, and in moments of great crisis, when a lot of lives were on the line, they stepped up and took responsibility and acted. They were men of action. They led and acted in moments of great crisis.

Instinctively, almost. It was as if they had been bred to be altruistic in that sense. I thought they had great qualities that came out of extreme hardship and were essentially about as selfless as you could get as human beings tested repeatedly in terrible conditions which changed over a long period of time.

They were extremely lucky to survive, and the impact of their actions was great. Not only did they save a lot of lives, often when you look at Medal of Honor recipients, when you drill

down into the actions for which they received the Medal of Honor, it most often comes down to saving lives around you. You do something so the people around you do not get killed, and that requires you to give your life or at least puts you in extreme danger. You will draw the fire; you will take out the enemy machine gun position; you will act so that the immediate danger is eliminated, or that it is lessened, and therefore you end up saving a lot of lives. But the Medal of Honor was given, more often than not, to individuals who made a decisive difference. They were responsible for those decisive actions which led to the saving of lives and also to an objective being obtained. Very few people in combat actually perform that way. They are outliers in two senses. It is worth stressing this. They are extremely fortunate because they did not get shot. The bullet went one inch one way or a centimeter the other. Over and over again, they were extremely lucky to survive. They were also remarkable in the sense they were a very small percentage of frontline troops who did take extraordinary risks which led the way out of a foxhole, who ran across open ground, who engaged in intense, close combat, and they did that voluntarily. They did it not just once, but over and over again, and it is a very small percentage. Less than five per cent of the 16,000,000 Americans who served in uniform in World War II were actually involved in combat. Of that five percent, you are getting down to just a handful of guys in a company, maybe one or two in a platoon of eighteen or twenty to thirty men. These are the people who when you are in battles, these are the people who get up and show the way, who take the big risks. They lead by example; they inspire others, and they do the really dirty work. They are the ones who actually get the job done. Battles completely depend on them. They are the most important people on the battlefield. Without them, you do not win a battle; you do not gain an objective, and you do not win a war. I wanted to focus on them and show in a way just

how different they were compared to the ninety-nine percent of combat troops in a battle. They were truly exceptional.

TB: You talk near the end of the book about carrying the burden, about the weight of having earned the Medal of Honor. Why is it such a heavy burden? Clearly, these are remarkable people, extraordinary people, and yet the weight of having been a recipient of the medal was, as you note of Michael Daly, a "heavy responsibility."

AK: There were 472 recipients of the Medal of Honor for actions in World War II. Not one example I came across was there any sense they wanted to be recognized, that they set out to win medals, that they set out to win anything except the war.

One Medal of Honor recipient from the Iraq War, after the 2003 invasion, I remember an interview I saw with him, and he said the day he received the Medal of Honor in the White House, the day they hung that medal around his neck in the White House, was the worst and the proudest day of his life. He was very proud obviously to receive the Medal of Honor. But it was also a terrible day because he remembered the circumstances in which he earned it. There is a lot of guilt, a lot of survivor's guilt that Medal of Honor recipients feel. They also feel very lucky someone witnessed their actions, because you must have eyewitnesses to earn the medal; to be cited for the medal, you must have official eyewitness reports. In the vast majority of times when people performed astonishing acts on the battlefield, they were not witnessed or there were not two people to write a report about what they did. Both the medal recommenders and Medal of Honor recipients know that Medal of Honor recipients often have seen other people do just as they did, but not receive anything for their actions. I would say most of them have PTSD in some

form. They are traumatized by the war in some way. Wearing that medal is a kind of constant reminder of what was done to them, what they endured, what they had to do to other people. A lot of Medal of Honor recipients are morally wounded. Taking somebody else's life is a very serious thing. Unless it is absolutely necessary, it can haunt you. It is a complex brew of emotions they feel.

Certainly in the case of Audie Murphy, certainly in the case of Maurice Britt and Michael Daly, the three guys (in fact, all of the four), all four guys I wrote about in *Against All Odds*, I believe they would have rather have not received the Medal of Honor and be publicly recognized because they had to live with that celebrity of being singled out as being somehow superhuman or special or braver than other people. They did not want that. They did not expect it, and they did not want to live up to what the Medal of Honor meant in other people's eyes. They could not drink and drive. They could not make mistakes in their private or public life because they were somehow held up as these superheroes in public. They felt constrained by that. They felt constrained by this badge which had been placed on them, and they did not recognize themselves. I mean, they were all human. They were flawed as all humans are. They were certainly not perfect, far from it. They felt sort of constrained by this expectation that they would behave in a certain way, and it just was not them. It is a complex brew of emotions.

TB: In your role as historian for the Friends of the National World War II Memorial, you travel widely to schools, give talks to the next generation about the legacy of the World War II generation. I have heard you talk to our students at Regis University, to our audience in our "Stories from Wartime" class. You are out visiting high schools on a regular basis, and so on. What do you hope students will take away from these stories, will learn from them? Again, there

is a complexity you just described, but you also share their enormous sense of sacrifice and altruism and courage and resilience. What are you hoping that the students resonate with?

AK: Well, the main talk I give most often is based on my book *The Liberator*, which Tom, you have a personal connection to. You knew General Sparks, didn't you? Did you meet General Sparks?

TB: I only met him through the videos in our archives, the same ones you drew upon for your wonderful book. The Regis Center for the Study of War Experience, especially Dr. Dan Clayton, did have profound interactions with General Sparks, especially when he shared his own story from wartime near the end of his life.

AK: It was through Regis I connected with Sparks, and he is a subject of my book, *The Liberator,* which came out in 2012. I owe Regis a big debt because you guys interviewed him at great, great lengths, and I gladly stole as much as I could from those videos. I have done presentations in about one hundred high schools across the US, some of them very tiny, private day schools, some of them in pretty deprived areas in the US. The talk I give every time is about *The Liberator*, and there are several takeaways, several buttons I press each time. One is that state sanctioned or legalized racism as occurred during the Third Reich led to genocide. We should be very wary of any kind of official prejudice against any minority, especially if you are American. America is basically a story of immigration. And at the heart of modern America is this perennial thorn of racism. The so-called greatest generation—a term which I feel uncomfortable about because it is a marketing term. It is the title of a book by Tom Brokaw, and it is an easy, lazy way

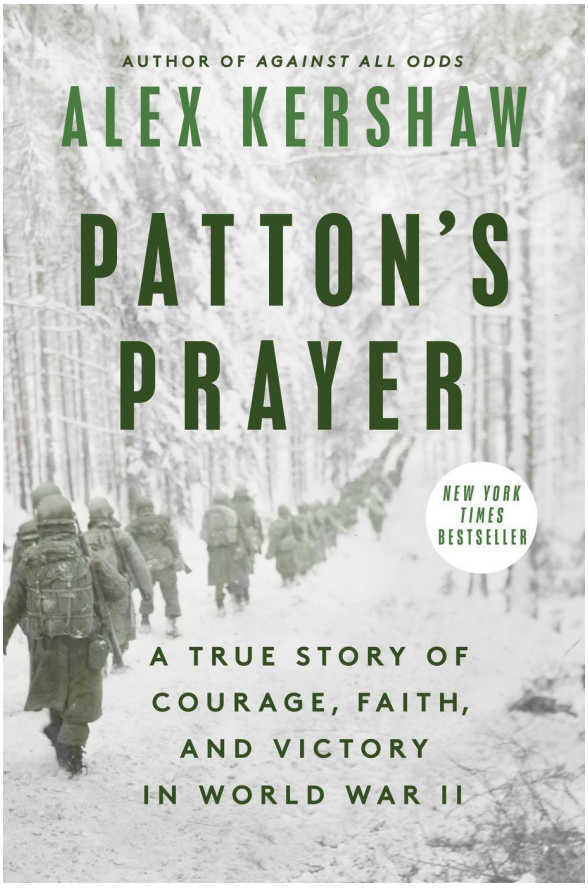
of describing a very complex, diverse generation of Americans who just happen to have survived the Depression and then go and serve in a brutal war. To come back to my point, one major lesson is that they did end the Holocaust. The people I write about who were soldiers in the European theatre ended the Holocaust; they ended what began with virulent anti-Semitism in many countries in Europe and turned into an extraordinary, unprecedented genocide. I try and make some of the students understand how prejudice and racism can lead to genocide. I also want them to feel proud of the Americans who served. Whether they knew they were ending the Holocaust or not is irrelevant. The net result is they defeated the Third Reich and ended the Holocaust.

That is a hell of an achievement and something we should remember. I also try and stress to them that they should try and be unified; they should try and band together with each other. I often ask them would you ever consider not playing in a state championship at basketball with a bunch of guys who were Republicans? If you are a Democrat, and vice versa, would someone's political affiliation divide you from them? Would you not date a Republican or a Democrat? And I have to say one of the most inspiring things for me is I look at these fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen-year-olds, and they just think I am talking absolute nonsense when I say that. Of course not. Of course it does not matter. I am reminded that at that age they have not been indoctrinated too much yet. Maybe some of them, but the vast majority do not seem to me to be politically indoctrinated to the point where they cannot make friends or be in a close-knit sports team or a community with people with different political views. That is a lesson to us all. It is something that inspires me to know people are not born polarized, that happens to them through the media and through the society they are growing up in. This awareness gives me hope. Looking at these exemplary individuals can give them examples of

people who were resilient and took initiative. They were humble, were not materialistic. Particularly, they did have a notion of America as being somewhere that was perhaps in some ways exceptional or a place they certainly felt was worth fighting for. You can romanticize too much, you can get way too sentimental and romanticize that era and that so-called greatest generation. But there were lots of things they had in common (and one of the things they all had in common) was that they did believe defeating Imperial Japan and defeating Nazism was a good thing to do. It was a good cause. Did they believe that after 350 days of combat and having lost almost all their friends and having been traumatized and disillusioned profoundly in a way none of us can understand? Even then some of them were proud of what they had achieved. There are lots of lessons we can learn from their resilience, their initiative, their humility, their awareness of others, their sense of community, their toughness, their modesty. They provide lots of great examples for us today, especially for young Americans, of how before them, every generation, up until relatively recently, had a really tough life.

TB: Let us pivot for the last few minutes and take up your newest book, *Patton's Prayer, A True Story of Courage, Faith, and Victory in World War II.* You start that book in the presence of this miracle Patton needed in December of 1944 to turn the tide against the German advance during the Battle of the Bulge. Why begin there? It is a great story, and anytime I talk about your book to people who are interested in World War II, they are astounded that this is something which really was central to Patton. It does not go with the kind of famous guts and glory persona we associate with Patton. But you pair courage with faith in your telling, and so I am interested in why begin with that prayer and what is it that many of us fail to understand about Patton before we read your book?

AK: Well, Patton is great fun to write about. I mean, there is not a more colorful American general, if any, not a more colorful general from World War II, from my point of view. He was very complex, very interesting. He had some great one-liners. Anybody who has seen the movie



Patton can appreciate the full eccentricity and genius and craziness of George Patton. I wanted to write about him because I thought he was just a really fun subject to write about, and I wanted to have some fun. But also I was very interested in what it was about him that made him such an effective leader. I was interested by the idea that he was completely politically incorrect, even by the 1940s standard. He was very unconventional in some ways, yet hyper-conventional in terms of being a strict disciplinarian. There were lots of aspects of his leadership that fascinated me. He was a really good delegator and trusted people a great deal. There is only one general in the Third Army who was fired by Patton, which I found astonishing. He was very loyal. He hired very well. He trusted people around him to an extraordinary degree, did not second-guess them, and was personally extremely brave. He put himself on the front line a lot, more so than any other general of his rank certainly, or any other division commander who I came across. He led from the front, led by example, was deeply compassionate, would cry at the drop of a helmet liner. He was kind of completely crazy and very violent. He believed war was about killing as many people as possible and getting it done as fast as possible. In that way he might not fit with other

people's expectations of what a modern military commander might say in public or express in public, but he got the job done.

And I was also really interested in this idea of faith, whatever, however you want to define that. There were thirty-seven different denominations within the Third Army, over 250 chaplains. Patton himself was a devout Episcopalian. He prayed every day. He was devout. But you had Muslims, you had Jews. You had thirty-seven different denominations. All faiths were represented by chaplains of some kind within the Third Army, and I became interested in this idea of what faith really meant in frontline combat. Does it mean a guy with a grey beard up on high at the pearly gates? Or does it mean faith in humanity, or lack of faith in humanity and therefore in something ex-human? Where did people find faith in whatever, however you want to define that?

Where would they find their support, their spiritual support in a very dark place? For most of the people I was writing about in the Third Army, it was the worst possible time and place in their lives. I looked at official US Army surveys taken just after the war, and, unsurprisingly, they found that in combat the majority of soldiers relied significantly on their faith of some kind, and that reliance went down when they moved away from the front lines. The more combat you saw, the more you relied on something called faith, and these beliefs were really pronounced. I was interested by the finding that if you were sort of quasi-religious, or you just went to church for christenings and funerals, your faith increased significantly in battle, and it remained strong for the rest of your life. When you came back from the war, then, you had not been converted, so to speak, but you were far more religious and you stayed far more religious. That interests me too, on a strictly personal level, the search for what can you look to outside of yourself to give meaning and strength to a life. What is a good life? How do you define a good

life? Something beyond the self. I thought was very interesting. There is a joke that there is no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole. In fact, there were an awful lot of people who became atheists in foxholes because they lost all religious belief, because they could not believe a righteous God or a righteous Savior, whatever you want to call it, could allow this to happen. That humanity could not be saved, and it was despicable, and completely nonsensical, what they were experiencing. It was evil in that sense.

Plenty of guys got into front line combat and lost all their faith. But far more, I would argue, looked for something outside themselves. They prayed a lot more. They relied on prayer. They attended services regularly. They sought some kind of spiritual prop and aid when they needed it most. In a way I was writing about Patton, but I was also interested in what people do when they are in very extreme circumstances and when they need to find strength somewhere, when they apparently cannot find it within themselves.

TB: At the end of the book, you are closing the narrative and you quote his aide, Colonel Charles Codman, who said, that for Patton, "duty, patriotism, fame, honor, glory, they were not mere abstractions. They were things he felt deeply" and then you conclude by saying his life was defined by courage, victory, and faith. As you reflect on Patton's life and leadership, what are the lessons we might benefit from today? I mean, if Patton were giving a course on leadership to us today, what would he be stressing?

AK: Well, the lessons are eternal. They are ones Julius Caesar would have been able to understand, Napoleon too, you name it. If you are in the business of war, you should do everything you possibly can to—if you are humane—to minimize loss of life, to get the job done

as quickly as possible and to make sure it does not happen again. Patton's a bit of a contradiction here. Patton was a warmonger. He loved war. He got into trouble for saying that. But he was at his very best in war, he enjoyed it. If you talk about finding happiness in the flow of activity, of being completely consumed by an activity, then he was at peak flow during the Battle of the Bulge and other big battles in World War II. To him, he was put on earth to be that kind of combat commander, and he excelled at it and loved it. But I would say he is very exceptional in that sense. He is a unicorn. That said, the net result, the result of what he achieved was millions and millions of Europeans growing up like me in freedom and democracy. By winning that war, not only did he end the Holocaust, he also helped liberate Western Europe from extreme evil and the unprecedented murder of civilians. Nineteen million civilians in Europe lay dead at the end of that war. He liberated Europe. He set the Germans free from their worst demons, from Nazism. He tried to minimize the loss of life of his own men. He did an extremely good job of winning that war in Europe. I do not think anybody had more impact than George Patton in terms of people freed, prisoners taken, battles won, towns liberated.

The lessons are also that we all need faith wherever we find it. We all need to think about getting out of our heads as much as possible by not being focused on the ego or our selfish needs. That is a big lesson for today. We should be outwardly directed rather than inwardly directed. We seem to live in this extremely narcissistic, self-referential world of social media and so-called healing. Everything seems to be about the self, ourselves, oneself rather than others. I do not want to sound like a nostalgic here or a sentimentalist, but Patton and the people I have written about (those we have talked about today), they belonged to a time when you were expected to step up and do things for other people. You did it through necessity; you did it through need; you did it because it was expected. It was a norm. It was a social norm to give a

damn about your neighbor, to care about other people, to not want people to be homeless, to not want people to suffer. In short, to be a part of something which was bigger than the individual, bigger than your family, which was part of a society and a community that shared common values and looked after people who could not look after themselves, one that provided a decent life to those people who were going to work hard and play by the rules.

We have become hyper-individualized. Social media and the internet have been much bigger curses than they have been blessings, and we have become way too focused on ourselves rather than even on our families or the people around us. There are a lot of morals in Patton's life, but certainly he was an exemplar for someone who lived his life through a faith-based approach. He was selfless over and over again. He was extremely selfless, in many aspects of his life. He believed in the United States with a passionate zeal. He believed in something bigger than himself, which was a great cause in World War II. In fact, his favorite prayer was not from the Bible. It was actually from Socrates. It was a verse from Socrates and, basically, the verse boils down to this: the best prayer you can have is for your life to mean something, to be a good life. A good life is where you have helped people, where the impact of your actions has made the community you live in, the world you live in, the people around you better. Where your life has benefited them, and you have done good in that sense. The meaning of a good life is to do something which positively impacts other people around you, that helps them; that is what it means to be a good person, to lead a good life—and Patton certainly did that. The net result of his life is that millions and millions of Europeans have enjoyed what I have, which is an extraordinary, blessed life of peace and freedom and mostly prosperity.

TB: I am going to ask you two last questions before we wrap up. First, an easy one. You are

impossibly busy. You are doing all kinds of outreach work. You are working for the memorial. You are out giving lectures. You are moderating monthly virtual conferences. You are sharing podcasts. Even with all these professional activities, are you also working on a new book? Do you have something that we can look forward to?

AK: I am writing a book called *The Last Bridge*, and it is about the crossing of the Ludendorff Bridge in March of 1945. On the 7th of March 1945, a bunch of guys from the 9th Armored Division crossed the last bridge standing across the Rhine, near Remagen, the Ludendorff Bridge. I argue that it is the single most important, single most impactful action by Americans in World War II. A relatively small group of Americans made this impact—because once we were across the Rhine, the war was basically over on the Western Front. That was the last natural barrier between us and Berlin. In a way, all of US strategy from Pearl Harbor onward had been directed at the defeat of the Third Reich, and then the defeat of Imperial Japan second. To defeat Nazism—certainly once we had disallowed conditional surrender, when we demanded unconditional surrender—we had to get across the Rhine and put boots on the ground in Nazi Germany and defeat them by fighting in Germany itself. The last big barrier to doing that, to finalizing that strategy was crossing the Rhine. In a way, the entire war aim for the United States in World War II, and certainly in the European theatre, the primary war aim was getting across the Rhine, because once you are across that river, you had won.

When we did cross the Rhine, it was the climax. It was the most impactful action toward the end of the war that speeded up the end of the war, that signified the end of the war, that signified ultimate victory, that honored the heroism and sacrifice. Whatever we had to do to get to that point was realized on the 7th of March 1945 when a bunch of guys ran across a bridge

that was blown up beneath their feet, but by some miracle did not collapse. Sheer guts, initiative, and courage and leadership and all the values and qualities we have talked about in this interview, they were epitomized—especially by their initiative and courage and daring and dash and pure guts—were epitomized at 2:30 to about 4:00 on the afternoon of the 7th of March 1945. This moment was the United States Army at its very best, doing what it did best in World War II, which was to set people free.

TB: We will look forward to *The Last Bridge*. When might it be released for publication?

AK: It is going to come out in spring of 2027. I am supposed to be finishing it in the next several months. I get a bit distracted, as you have already pointed out, but it is in front of me now, about halfway through.

TB: Last question: you have touched on this several times in our conversation today, and I just want to give you the final word. In the lectures and talks you give, you say that you want Americans to know these stories, especially young Americans. We were talking about that with high school students earlier, where you hoped they could be proud of preserving democracy. You invite audiences to be vigilant, because democracy is an amazing, yet fragile thing. As you have noted several times today, we all have been the beneficiaries of the sacrifices made by this generation, by their fight to restore democracy and preserve a way of life. You have told their stories for almost thirty years, and here we are eighty years out from the end of that conflict. And yet, in many ways these stories have never been more important. You continue to do your

bit to help us remain vigilant, to preserve democracy, to be proud of the freedoms that were preserved by winning World War II. In short, why do these stories matter so much?

AK: Well, they matter because they show human beings at their very best. They matter, above all, because I really, really appreciate the sacrifice and the suffering these men I write about went through so that they could preserve democracy, so they could give me the life I have lived. A life of freedom, the human rights I have enjoyed, the civilization I have enjoyed, the culture I have enjoyed, the sense of being European I have vastly enjoyed. Everything I hold dear about being a human being, these people fought for and preserved. I hope we can always appreciate that and that we can, in appreciating that, we can look at any threat to democracy, whatever, wherever it may come from, whether it be an armed enemy or an enemy who wants to turn the great American experiment into an autocracy. It does not matter. We need to appreciate that the freedoms we still do enjoy were bought with blood and bought with courage and bought with extraordinary sacrifice. But it does not come free. It needs to be protected; it needs to be revered; it needs to be strengthened, and we need to be vigilant. We need to be constantly vigilant in the face of people who would undermine a system of human governance, a system that has no peer.

There is no better experiment in human history. I mean, Churchill said it wonderfully. Democracy is not perfect, but it is the best of all the alternatives. And it is a beautiful thing that America has enjoyed for 250 years. It has been a model to many, many people around the world, many other democracies, the Atlantic Alliance; the alliance between the UK and Western democracy and the United States has been the pivot of the modern world. It is the most important relationship we have. Whether Americans like it or not, they have been cast in the role

of a world leader. We do need a moral policeman. We do need a beacon for others to look to for human rights, representational democracy, self-determination. We need America to be an emblem, to be strong, to lead, to be decisive, to be involved, to be an ally, to be a global example of progressive humanity. By progressive, I mean a nation that wants to make things get better for everybody, not just Americans, but everybody on this fragile planet. I worry that the United States is somehow failing in that role right now when it is much, much required and much, much desired.

Look at any global issue, poverty, water resources, climate change, global instability, autocracies that are capitalist systems but deny human rights. The US can still and should still play a very important role, if not the predominant role, in leading the way as an example to other people around the world. We must show them how you can organize a society, or try and organize, a society that is just and fair and that is truly representative of people and of democracy. Of course, America has not dealt with many issues. It is not some sort of Nirvana. It never has been, never will be. It has a very complex, dark history in some ways. But also we should not forget all the amazing things that have been achieved by this country. I think about what came out of World War II: the global system of security, the United Nations, the European Union that has been protected and aided by the United States. I mean, for God's sake, at the Nuremberg war crimes trial, the US was trying to establish a precedent that aggressive war was illegal. This is how idealistic this country was at certain times in its past. The idea of America is one that can always be refined and renewed.

I am an optimist, but we have to be vigilant. We must be very vigilant, and I will finish by sharing what I asked a D-Day veteran, a French D-Day veteran who liberated his own country on the 6th of June 1944. I asked him for any lessons for future generations, young people in

particular. I asked for lessons he could give about why World War II had mattered, why what he had done himself had mattered. He said it is simple. You must be vigilant. If you want to live in a democracy, you must protect it. You have to participate in it. You have to be an active citizen. You have to act. You have to vote. You have to care about issues. You have to be an active participant in this very rare historical event called democracy, and you should study democracy. You should study history because the alternative is horrific. It is not something people would enjoy long term or even in the short term. For me, I do not want to live in any place that is not a democracy. It is a huge human accomplishment, and we need to protect it and strengthen it. Not just protect it, but strengthen it as much as we can, make it fairer, take the money out of politics. We must have proper representation, strengthen or rewrite parts of the Constitution, adapt it, bolster it, protect it, nurture it, and savor it. Most of all, we must celebrate it, because it is a beautiful, beautiful thing.

TB: Well, thank you so much for your time today, for your nurturing and celebrating of this thing we call democracy.

Thomas G. Bowie, Jr., conducted this interview for *War, Literature & the Arts* on September 22, 2025. Tom recently retired from Regis University after over two decades as a professor and administrator. Currently, he is Professor and Dean Emeritus of Regis College. Much of his research focuses on the human dimension of conflict, on personal narratives and fiction that bear witness to the horrors of modern war, and on the journey toward reconciliation that inevitably follows such conflicts. For over two decades, he has worked with the Regis University Center for the Study of War Experience, interviewing veterans, collaborating with authors and scholars, collecting stories from wartime. Together they have engaged in the vital work of bearing witness to modern war.