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MY EXPERIENCES IN THE WORLD WAR Excerpts from the Memoirs of General John J. Pershing, Commander in Chief, American Expeditionary Forces (AEF)

The material that follows was extracted from the 1931 memoirs of General Pershing. Portions covering the first months of General Pershing's tenure as Commander in Chief, AEF are repeated here to remind the reader of the state of the Army upon the American entry into World War I in support of the allies in Europe. The reader should reflect on these historical events and the lessons learned articulated in the memoirs of General Pershing and relate them to the course the Army may be forced to take in this period after the allied victory in the Cold War and Operation Desert Storm. Deja vu?

Introduction

My primary purpose in writing this story of the American Expeditionary Forces in France is to render what I conceive to be an important service to my country. In that adventure there were many lessons useful to the American people, should they ever again be called to arms, and I felt it a duty to record them as I saw them.

The World War found us absorbed in the pursuits of peace and quite unconscious of probable threat to our security. We would listen to no warnings of danger. We had made small preparation for defense and none for aggression. So when war actually came upon us we had to change the very habits of our lives and minds to meet its realities. The slow processes by which we achieved these changes and applied our latent power to the problems of combat in Europe, despite our will, our numbers and our wealth, I endeavor to describe. Therein lie the lessons of which I write.

Consequences of Neutrality

After the Franco-Prussian War, Germany had emerged as the strongest military power of Europe and was the leader in the development of military science and tactics. During the decade prior to the World War the improvement and increase of her heavier artillery and the organization of machine gun units had gone forward rapidly. The very extensive expansion and use of these arms by the Japanese in Manchuria had not escaped the notice of German observers, and her experts were quick to take advantage of the lessons of that war. While these facts were commonly known in military circles, neither the extent of the growth of her land forces that had recently taken place nor the forecast

that she would complete her military program about the year 1914 had made sufficient impression on her possible adversaries to cause serious alarm.

The violation of Belgian neutrality afforded Germany the advantage of invading France from the most favorable quarter, yet it was no justification for her to claim that strategical considerations impelled her to take this action. In disregarding the Treaty of London of 1839 Germany presented the strongest kind of evidence of her war guilt. Moreover, this overt act served to give notice to all nations that Germany intended to brook no opposition in her purpose to conquer her ancient enemy once and for all. I cannot escape the conviction that in view of this defiance of neutral rights the United States made a grievous error in not immediately entering a vigorous protest.

The invasion of Belgium [in 1914] was in fact an open declaration of Germany's attitude toward all neutral rights. If our people had grasped its meaning they would have at least insisted upon preparation to meet more effectively the later cumulative offenses of Germany against the law of nations, one of the most inhumane of which was the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Here was provocation enough for very positive action by any government alive to its obligations to protect its citizens. The fact is that the world knew only too well that we had for years neglected to make adequate preparations for defense, and Germany therefore dared to go considerably further than she would have gone if we had been even partially ready to support our demands by force.

It will be recalled that after some diplomatic correspondence the question of the use of submarines as it affected us rested until the sinking, without warning, of the *Sussex*, a Channel steamer carrying American passengers, on March 24, 1916. Germany was then notified that unless she should immediately declare and effect an abandonment of such methods of submarine warfare against passenger and freight-carrying vessels there would be no choice for us but to sever diplomatic relations with her. In reply, Germany made a definite promise to sink no more vessels without warning, although she made reservations as to the future.

Germany was informed that her reply was unsatisfactory, and there the question was again dropped, apparently without our seriously considering the action that we necessarily would be forced to take in the event of her resumption of ruthless methods. Little more than a gesture was made to get ready for eventualities; in fact, practically nothing was done in the way of increasing our military strength or of providing equipment.

As to our navy, however, Congress did appropriate more than \$300,000,000 in August 1916, for expansion, and some progress was made in beginning the construction of small craft and the establishment of a better administrative organization. This same Congress also passed an act providing for the reorganization of our military forces, but scarcely a move was made to carry it out prior to our actual entrance into the war. Thus we presented the spectacle of the most powerful nation in the world sitting on the sidelines, almost idly watching the enactment of the greatest tragedy of all time, in which it might be compelled at any minute to take an important part.

It is almost inconceivable that there could have been such an apparent lack of foresight in administration circles regarding the probable necessity for an increase of our military forces and so little appreciation of the time and effort which would be required to prepare them for effective service. The

inaction played into the hands of Germany, for she knew how long it would take us to put an army in the field, and governed her action accordingly. In other words, the date of resuming indiscriminate submarine warfare, February 1, 1917, was timed with the idea that the greater part of neutral and British shipping could be destroyed before we could be ready, should we by any chance enter the war.

Let us suppose that, instead of adhering to the erroneous theory that neutrality forbade any move toward preparation, we had taken the precaution in the spring of 1916 to organize and equip an army of half a million combatant troops, together with the requisite number of supply troops for such a force. This could have been done merely by increasing the Regular Army and National Guard to war strength. Such action would have given us the equivalent of forty average Allied divisions, ready to sail at once for France upon the declaration of war. Preparation to this extent could have been carried out by taking advantage of the concentration of the Regular Army and National Guard on the Mexican Border in 1916.

The actual situation on the Western Front when we entered the war (April 6, 1917) was more favorable for the Allies than at any previous time. The strength of the German forces there had been greatly reduced because of the necessity for supporting the Russian front. Although reports were filtering in regarding the beginning of the revolution, there was little to indicate that Russia was not still a factor to be reckoned with. Actually the Allies had an advantage of something over 20 percent in numbers, French morale was high, owing to their successful defense of Verdun, and the British armies had reached their maximum power.

Under these conditions, it is not extravagant to assert that the addition of 500,000 American combat troops in early spring would have given the Allies such a preponderance of force that the war could have been brought to a victorious conclusion before the end of that year. Even without such aid, the confidence of the Allies led them to undertake a general offensive in April. Although it ended in defeat, especially for the French, the failure can be attributed to a large extent to lack of secrecy of the plans. A well-planned campaign with the assistance of half a million Americans would have told quite another story.

Thus, through a false notion of neutrality, which had prevented practically all previous preparation, a favorable opportunity to assist the Allies was lost, the war was prolonged another year and the cost in human life tremendously increased. But, from another viewpoint, it is not improbable that if we had been thus prepared, our rights would have been respected and we would not have been forced into the war. We shall see as we proceed how great were the difficulties to be overcome because of our inexcusable failure to do what common reason long before our entry into the war plainly indicated should have been done.

American Expeditionary Forces Established

On March 15, 1917, acting under instructions of the Chief of Staff, the War College Division had submitted a rather general scheme which contemplated an army of 500,000 men. These were all eleventh-hour recommendations and definite action was not taken until May 18th, when Congress passed the law authorizing the increase of the Military establishment through the application of the draft.

I was really more chagrined than astonished to realize that so little had been done in the way of preparation when there were so many things that might have been done long before. It has been apparent to everybody for months that we were likely to be forced into the war, and a state of war had actually existed for several weeks, yet scarcely a start had been made to prepare for our participation.

Still proceeding under the assumption that I was to command only a division in France, my feelings may well be imagined when, a day or so later (in early May 1917), the Secretary of War called me in to say that it had been decided by the President to send me abroad as Commander in Chief, and that I should select my staff accordingly and prepare to sail as soon as possible.

The thought of the responsibilities that this high position carried depressed me for the moment. Here in the face of great war I had been placed in command of a theoretical army which had yet to be constituted, equipped, trained, and sent abroad.

American Preparedness

My first meeting with Marshal Joffre was during his farewell call on the Secretary of War late in May. I entered just as he and his party were leaving. He spoke of the serious situations in France and expressed the hope of seeing American troops on the Western Front very soon. Here was a Marshal of France who, as Commander in Chief of the French Army for nearly three years, had made his name immortal, apparently appealing for military assistance from a man recently designated to be commander in chief of an army not yet in existence. I have often wondered what must have been his thoughts under the circumstances, but whatever he may have felt as to the new commander himself, the totally unready situation that he found in America could not have been very encouraging.

The following significant statement made by Mr. Lloyd George at a meeting of the Allies at the Quai d'Orsay on May 4, 1917, showed that the Allies expected little real military aid from us and doubted whether the shortage in tonnage would enable us to maintain large American forces:

It is upon the shoulders of France and Great Britain that the whole burden of the war rests. ... America is still an unknown. We must not count upon her aid in a military way for a long time to come. Five hundred thousand Americans brought to this side of the water would be useful to us, if the war lasts so long, but we must live while awaiting them, and we do not know whether we will have next year the tonnage necessary to maintain such considerable forces transported from the other side of the Atlantic.

The possibility of our being able to send a completely trained and equipped army within a reasonable time, even though there had been sufficient shipping, was remote because of our woeful state of unpreparedness. We had no such army and could not have one for several months to come. Allied hopes were still centered on our sending individual recruits or companies to maintain the strength of their armies, and if a military crisis had arisen at this time our condition would have compelled us to comply with their wishes. It was most fortunate that the Central Powers did not then have the necessary forces on the Western Front to assume a vigorous offensive.

The more serious the situation in France, the more deplorable the loss of time by our inaction at home appeared. It is true that a committee at the War College in February had presented a brief outline report on the organization of a limited force, yet no comprehensive general plan had been considered for the formation or employment of such a force, much less for a larger one.

Figuratively speaking, then, when the Acting Chief of Staff went to look in the secret files where plans to meet the situation that confronted us should have been found, the pigeonhole was empty. In other words, the War Department was face to face with the question of sending an army to Europe and found that the General Staff had never considered such a thing. No one in authority had any definite idea how many men might be needed, how they should be organized and equipped, or where the tonnage to transport and supply them was to come from.

After our forces were organized, equipped and trained at home, they must be sent from different parts of the United States varying from 3,000 to 6,000 miles to reach the battle front. Our merchant marine had never recovered from the great loss in ships during the Civil War, and we were now confronted with the question of transporting our armies across the sea in the face of the serious menace of submarines.

Granting that shipping would be found, we must select terminal ports in France available for our use and reasonably free from submarine dangers, and consider the construction of additional berths. Railway lines must be designated and repaired, new lines must be built and increased rolling stock provided in order that the system should be ready to transport our troops to the front upon their arrival and debarkation. Then came the question of handling the enormous quantities of munitions and supplies that would have to be furnished in order to maintain our forces once they should engage in active operations.

These were some of the problems that confronted us. Their solution demanded prompt action in making plans and persistence in carrying them out. Much of the necessary material for docks, railways, and storehouses must come from home, together with labor to utilize it. Without the utmost effort it would have been impossible to have the army and its supply system ready when the time came for decisive achievement.

Status of Munitions

Our deplorable situation as to munitions was fully discussed at a conference called by the Secretary of War in his office on the afternoon of May 10th. A general survey of our requirements for the immediate future was made as to rifles, machine guns, light and heavy artillery, ammunition and airplanes. It was brought out that we had for issue, not in the hands of troops, only about 285,000 Springfield rifles, 400 light field guns, and 150 heavy field guns.

As it was impossible, because of manufacturing difficulties, for our factories to turn out enough Springfield rifles within a reasonable time, the Secretary, after hearing the facts, decided to adopt the Enfield rifle for our infantry. It was then being manufactured for the British in large quantities at private factories in our country and a slight modification of the chamber only was necessary to make it fit our ammunition. More than 2,000,000 of these rifles were manufactured during the war.

Although Congress had appropriated \$12,000,000 for the procurement of machine guns in 1916, it was reported to the conference that we had less than 1,500 guns and that these were of four different types. This condition existed because the War Department had not decided definitely which type to adopt for our Army, although an order had been placed late in 1916 for a quantity of the heavy Vickers-Maxims. Tests of machine guns were held in May 1917, and an entirely new type was pronounced acceptable and adopted by the Ordnance Department. Until these could be manufactured we had to purchase machine guns of the Hotchkiss type from the French.

Our earlier divisions were seriously handicapped in their preparation at home by lack of machine guns for training, many units not receiving this arm until after their arrival in France. When it is recalled that each division at the beginning of the war was allowed only 92 machine guns and no automatic rifles, and that under our war organization 260 machine guns and 768 automatic rifles were required, the result of delay in providing these guns needs no further comment.

Our capacity to manufacture small arms ammunition in large quantities was assured through the operation of private factories. As in the case of Enfield rifles, this was due to increased production for sale to the Allies prior to our entry into the war and not to any preparatory action by the War Department. Except for our 3-inch artillery ammunition, we did not have enough to provide for more than nine hours' supply, even for the limited number of guns on hand, firing at the rate ordinarily used in laying down a barrage for an infantry attack.

Status of Artillery

The question of artillery procurement caused me much concern. The almost negligible amount on hand when we went to war consisted mostly of field guns of the 3-inch type, then largely in the hands of troops, in the Philippine Islands or elsewhere, and unavailable for issue. Moreover, for calibers heavier than the 3-inch type our Ordnance Department had adopted nothing which was really up to date.

When George Washington was once asked which arm of the combat service he would increase if he could have the choice, he replied that it would be the artillery. Since the day its ratio to infantry in all armies has gradually grown. The most striking change in our time developed in the Russo-Japanese War, when the proportionate increase, especially by the Japanese, became greater than ever before. Our American observers in Manchuria fully reported to the War Department the increased employment of artillery, but in those days it was idle for any military man to talk of more guns for our Army, and the Government made no attempt to keep pace with this tendency in modern armies. On the other hand, Germany quickly realized the growing importance of artillery and so effectively did she develop this arm that during the first years of the World War the Central Powers had a decided superiority over the Allies.

It was estimated that we should have, as an initial requirement, 2,524 guns with a possibility of obtaining only 80 in September and 40 in October from our own foundries, and with no prospect of further deliveries until June, 1918. The enormous proportion of both light and heavy guns used by both sides, the knowledge of our deficiency and the realization of the length of time that must elapse

before we could manufacture and deliver them made it imperative that we seek other sources than our own to help equip our armies.

Following up an intimation, it was learned definitely that, although not fully supplied themselves, the French could increase the output of their factories provided they could get steel from the United States. As it seemed probable that we should operate in proximity to their armies, we adopted the French types for the usual calibers and sought their assistance in obtaining the guns needed, at least for the first two years. We secured an agreement that our troops, as they came along, would be provided with French guns and ammunition, including not only the 75s and 155s but 37-millimeter guns and 58-millimeter trench mortars as well. In advising the War Department by cable of the arrangement, late in June, it was insisted that nothing should diminish our efforts at home, not only to produce these types, but also those of the 4.7-inch and 6-inch mobile types. In my cable of July 14th, the expedition of the 8-inch and 9.5 inch howitzers then under manufacture was also urged. It was most fortunate that we were able to get these guns from the French, as up to the end of the war no guns manufactured at home for our army, of the types used, except 24 8-inch mortars and 6 14-inch naval guns, were fired in battle. Trench guns of the 3-inch and 6-inch mortar types, with ammunition, were purchased from the British.

Status of Aviation

The situation at that time as to aviation was such that every American ought to feel mortified to hear it mentioned. Out of 65 officers and about 1,000 men in the Air Service Section of the Signal Corps, there were 35 officers who could fly. With the exception of five or six officers, none of them could have met the requirements of modern battle conditions and none had any technical experience with aircraft guns, bombs or bombing devices.

We could boast some 55 training planes in various conditions of usefulness, all entirely without war equipment and valueless for service at the front. Of these 55 planes, it is amusing now to recall that the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, which was then conducting a scientific study of the problem of flight, advised that 51 were obsolete and the other 4 obsolescent. We could not have put a single squadron in the field, although it was estimated later that we should eventually need at least 300 squadrons, each to be composed on the average of some 24 officers, 180 men and 18 airplanes, besides a large reserve of planes for replacements.

The expectations of the Allies concerning our assistance in the air are shown by the following cable from the French Prime Minister, received about May 24, 1917, which formed the basis of War Department effort:

It is desired that in order to cooperate with the French Aeronautics, the American government should adopt the following program: The formation of a flying corps of 4,500 airplanes — personnel and materiel included — to be sent to the French front during the campaign of 1918. The total number of pilots, including reserve, should be 5,000 and 50,000 mechanics.

2,000 airplanes should be constructed each month as well as 4,000 engines, by the American factories. That is to say, that during the first six months of 1918, 16,500 planes (of the latest type) and 30,000 engines will have to be built.

The French Government is anxious to know if the American Government accepts this proposition, which would allow the Allies to win the supremacy of the air.

Ribot

This message, in its appeal for such a large number of aviation personnel and airplanes was really a most convincing confession of the plight of the Allied armies. But more than that, it strikingly brought home to us a full realization of our pitiful deficiencies, not only in aviation but in all equipment. The appropriation in July 1917 of \$640,000,000 for aviation indicated the Congress understood the predicament that confronted us, but what a commentary it was on the lack of that wisdom which should have prompted both the people and their representatives to earlier actions.

Thus the deeper we went into the situation the more overwhelming the work ahead of us seemed to be. As the degree of its accomplishment within a reasonable time would be the measure of our aid to the Allies, extreme haste in our preparation was urgent. We were called upon to make up in a few months for the neglect of years during which self-satisfied provincialism and smug complacency had prevented the most elementary efforts toward a reasonable precaution to meet such an emergency.

Military Facilities

In an attempt to provide the thousands of additional officers needed for the first 500,000 troops tentatively considered necessary under the War College plan, the Secretary of War about the middle of April directed the establishment of training camps, one for each of the proposed sixteen infantry divisions that were to form such a force. Noncommissioned officers from the Regular Army and the National Guard, augmented by graduates of schools and colleges where military instruction was given, were put through a three months' course of instruction in these camps.

The organization of our Army had never been based up on the tactical requirements of battle, but we still maintained our troops at small posts, as in the days of Indian warfare. Some of these posts, although they lacked sufficient barracks and training areas for units as large as a division, could have been advantageously used in the earlier stages of training up to the limits of their accommodations.

In lieu of any previous plans, the Secretary contemplated the construction of cantonments in different parts of the country, and on May 7th the Commanding Generals of the several departments were directed to select sites for that purpose. Under the circumstances, the proposed plan seemed to be the only alternative for training the larger units, provided this building program could be carried out without delay, but it should have been to obtain enough tentage for the Regular Army and the National Guard at once so that training of the necessary additional drafts to fill them could have been started in their respective localities. Time was the most important factor to be considered.

The actual construction of cantonments was not began until nearly three months after we had entered the war, and even though the task of erecting them was accomplished in record time, some ninety days more had elapsed before they were ready to receive troops. Thus, it was, with some expectations, practically six months before the training of our new army was under way. Even then

several of these camps were not favorably located and training was seriously handicapped on this account during the fall and winter months.

Training the AEF

The most important question that confronted us in the preparation of our forces for citizen soldiery for efficient service was training. Except for the Spanish-American War, nearly twenty years before, actual combat experience of the Regular Army had been limited to the independent action of minor commands in the Philippines and to two expeditions into Mexico, each with forces smaller than a modern American division. The World War involved the handling of masses where even a division was relatively a small unit. It was one thing to call one or two million men to the colors, and quite another thing to transform them into an organized, instructed army capable of meeting and holding its own in the battle against the best trained force in Europe with three years of actual war experience to its credit.

There were other causes ... that led to confusion and irregularity in training to such an extent that we were often compelled during the last stages of the war to send men into battle with little knowledge of warfare and sometimes with no rifle practice at all.

In the organization of our armies for the World War it was evident that if any considerable numbers were to be sent aboard, an additional force would be needed over and above the Regular Army and the National Guard. The War Department therefore established what was called the National Army, to be composed principally of men who were to come into the service through the draft. Most of the divisions of the National Army were organized in August and September and some men were then assigned to them. As the time approached to begin the training of the smaller units, it was found that after equipping the special troops urgently needed in France there was little equipment left even for the additional men required to fill up the National Guard. Unfortunately, this made it necessary to delay calling out more drafts for the units for the National Army. However, considerable numbers were called into service and proceeded with preliminary instruction, but the lack of equipment seriously delayed their progress.

Professional Officer Corps

To help meet this lack of experienced general staff officers with our armies, the General Staff College established at Langres, a few miles south of Chaumont, provided an intensive course of three months, which though brief, covered instruction in the details of our own staff organization and administration, our system of supply, and the coordination and employment of our forces in combat. While the student officers were selected for their aptitude, it was not possible to graduate thoroughly trained staff officers in such a short time, but the urgency was so great that the course could not be made longer. Having been taught a common doctrine, with a loyal sense of cooperation well accentuated, they were fairly well grounded in the theory and had to trust to the costly school of experience for the rest.

Victory Observations, November 11, 1918

The experience of the World War only confirmed the lessons of the past. The divisions with little training, while aggressive and courageous, were lacking in the ready skill of habit. They were capable of powerful blows, but their blows were apt to be awkward — teamwork was often not well understood. Flexible and resourceful divisions cannot be created by a few maneuvers or by a few months' association of their elements. On the other hand, without the keen intelligence, the endurance, the willingness, and the enthusiasm displayed in the training areas and on the battlefields, the decisive results obtained would have been impossible.

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