

**Pershing, John Joseph** (13 Sept. 1860-15 July 1948), commander of the American Expeditionary Force in World War I, was born at Laclede, Missouri, the son of John Frederick Pershing, a storekeeper and railroad worker, and Anne Elizabeth Thompson. After attending the Missouri State Normal School in Kirksville, Pershing became a schoolteacher, but a newspaper notice enticed him to apply for admission to the U.S. Military Academy, which he entered in 1882.

Pershing struggled with the first year's curriculum, but he ranked high in "military art" from the start. In his last year he was selected first captain of the Corps of Cadets--an honor reserved to the one most respected by both faculty and peers. High standing overall (thirtieth of seventy-seven in the graduating class of 1886) won him assignment to the cavalry, and he joined the Sixth Regiment in New Mexico. Pershing's regiment helped assemble scattered tribes, established heliograph stations between frontier forts, made maps, and played chasing games (cavalry maneuvers) across stretches of desert.

Appointment as professor of military science and tactics at the University of Nebraska took Pershing in September 1891 to Lincoln where he also taught math, pursued a law degree, and won national drill team honors. Among his students were [Willa Cather](#) and [Dorothy Canfield](#) (Dorothy Canfield Fisher), and his circle of friends included [Roscoe Pound](#), [Charles Dawes](#), and [William Jennings Bryan](#). Four successful years in Lincoln polished Pershing's manners and opened his mind. Reluctant to leave, he rejoined the cavalry.

Hard campaigning and the roughness of the frontier made Pershing a tough and seasoned soldier. An assignment escorting roaming Cree Indians back to Canada in the summer of 1896 taught him of the resilience, cunning, and bravery of native forces. Those lessons, combined with experiences with the bravery, loyalty, and devotion of black troopers in Pershing's new regiment, the Tenth Cavalry, were not lost on his professional mind.

First Lieutenant Pershing returned to West Point on 15 June 1897 as a tactical officer. Harassing cadets about such mundane matters as room decorum and appearance, he became the most unpopular cadet training officer, so unpopular that he earned the infamous "silence" when he entered the dining hall. Luckily, approaching troubles with Spain offered respite. He yearned for a combat assignment. As war with Spain erupted in 1898, he pulled some strings and received an assignment to the Tenth Cavalry in Cuba. Pershing showed skill as a supply man and saw combat at Kettle and San Juan Hills with an old acquaintance, Colonel [Theodore Roosevelt](#) (1858-1919) of the Rough Riders.

From Cuba Pershing returned to Washington for important service as aide to the general in chief of the army, [Nelson A. Miles](#). Pershing showed promise in the eddies of Washington politics and soon attracted the attention of President [William McKinley](#), who noted his efficiency, and Secretary of War [Elihu Root](#), who found him to be a man with an international vision. Pershing's law degree made him the logical choice to head the War Department's new Bureau of Insular Affairs--an agency charged with making policies to govern such colonial areas as might fall to the U.S. in the course of expansionism. Facing issues of international economics and constitutional law, Pershing built a bureau that handled new territories through turbulent years.

From Washington, Pershing went to the Philippines and fought against Emilio Aguinaldo's insurgents on Luzon then against the Moros on Mindanao and Jolo. Put in charge of a large section of southern Mindanao, Pershing faced hostility and incipient rebellion. Determined to govern his area, he undertook a pacification campaign. With a small force of regulars, Philippine scouts, and constabulary, he marched around Lake Lanao, subduing fractious chieftains as he went. He completed the march on 13 May 1903. News of his surprising victories brought him notice in the army and in Washington. Captain Pershing had commanded ably an independent force worthy of a colonel. In a combined civil and military role he tempered war with diplomacy, and he made friends of old enemies. The praise he received from prominent "dattos" (chieftains) and sultans surprised experienced Philippine officials. President Theodore Roosevelt wanted to reward Pershing with promotion to brigadier general, but the rigid army seniority system made that almost impossible. Roosevelt sought ways to circumvent the system.

Selection to the new General Staff Corps in 1903 took Pershing back to Washington, where he met and in 1905 married Frances Warren, daughter of Republican senator Francis Warren of Wyoming. When war erupted between Japan and Russia, Pershing won a coveted place as U.S. military observer at Japanese field headquarters in Manchuria, where he learned much about such modern weapons as machine guns and long-range artillery. Captain Pershing left Manchuria for Japan in 1905. In mid-September of the following year, Roosevelt, aided by Senator Warren (who chaired the Military Affairs Committee), nominated him for a jump promotion to brigadier general. Jealousy, envy, and scandalous rumors clouded the nomination, but Pershing's general popularity prevailed, and he was confirmed. He took command of Fort McKinley near Manila. His Philippine service was interrupted in 1908, but in November 1909 Pershing became military governor and commander of Moro Province, with headquarters in Zamboanga. There the Pershings enjoyed some of their happiest days, even though his duties were difficult.

Following old practice, Pershing visited important dattos and sultans, villages and towns. When Manila authorities decided that Moros should be disarmed, Pershing pushed a careful program of persuasion and reward. Trouble could not be avoided entirely, and he fought resisters fiercely and successfully at Bud Dajo, Jolo Island, in December 1911. Another large outbreak against U.S. rule rocked Jolo Island in 1913. Pershing led a strong force at the major battle of Bagsak Mountain, 11-15 June 1913, earning respect from the vanquished along with a tenuous peace. His work in the Moro Province won Pershing the admiration even of those who had opposed his promotion, and on 15 December 1913 he took command of the Eighth Brigade at San Francisco's Presidio.

Pershing settled into making the Eighth the best brigade in the army. Rigorous training, close attention to details of appearance, supply, and discipline again were his hallmarks. A burnished brigade won him the important command of Fort Bliss, Texas, in April 1914. While he was arranging family quarters at Fort Bliss, tragedy struck at the Presidio. Early on the morning of 27 August 1915, fire swept through the Pershing house. His wife and three daughters perished; only his son Warren survived.

Pershing fought heartache with work, and Texas-Mexican border problems kept him busy. Revolution riddled Mexico. In the north the renegade leader [Pancho Villa](#) vied for power with Venustiano Carranza's government. On the night of 8-9 March 1916, Villa's men raided

Columbus, New Mexico, killed soldiers and civilians, plundered the town, and escaped. President [Woodrow Wilson](#) ordered retaliation. The task was Pershing's because his command was closest to Columbus. Collecting cavalry, infantry, and artillery units, along with such new elements as field radio transmitters, machine gun and motor truck companies, and even the First Aero Squadron, he led some 11,000 men into Chihuahua on 15 March 1916. Wilson insisted U.S. forces were engaged in a "punitive expedition" against Villa on President Carranza's invitation. But Pershing's troops could not enter a Mexican town without the mayor's approval, they could not use east-west railways or main roads, and they had to cooperate with government forces whenever possible. These harsh restrictions made the pursuit of Villa's mobile band difficult. Refuge opened to the bandit hero everywhere, while Pershing's men were unwelcome and could gather little intelligence from the populace. Skirmishes and occasional battles with Villa's men (and even Carranza's) won little but enmity. In winter quarters near Colonia Dublán in northern Chihuahua, Pershing built a large tent city, replete with medical facilities, airplane repair shops, drilling grounds, and storage facilities. He kept abreast of the war in Europe, and, expecting U.S. involvement, he trained his men in trench tactics and the use of modern weapons.

On 25 September 1916 Pershing became a major general in the relatively small U.S. Army. Careful management of difficult situations in Mexico plus wide and distinguished foreign service earned the promotion. When he led his expedition back into Texas on 5 February 1917, he ranked as one of the United States's most experienced commanders. The sudden death on 19 February 1917 of his immediate superior, Major General [Frederick Funston](#), commander of the Southern Department, elevated Pershing to that command. He handled the work with customary ease by gathering around him a skilled, efficient staff (including [George Patton](#)), keeping a close eye on details, and continuing preparations for war abroad.

In April 1917 the United States entered the First World War. President Wilson and Secretary of War [Newton D. Baker](#) selected Pershing to command the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in Europe. On 28 May 1917 he and a staff of about 180 sailed for France on the SS *Baltic*. En route Pershing designed the outlines of the AEF and devised a schedule for its development.

Liverpool, London, and Boulogne offered loud welcomes in early June, but Paris exploded in a paroxysm of joy on the thirteenth. Wined and feted, Pershing paid an important courtesy visit to aged Marshal Joseph Joffre, hero of France's early campaigns; and at Napoleon's tomb, when the emperor's sword was thrust in his hand, instinctively he kissed it. Word of the gesture ran through France on an electric thrill of pride. Modest, businesslike, and serious, the American charmed and impressed everyone. Pershing saw in all the fervor a desperate Allied need for help. Germany seemed likely to break the trench stalemate soon. British efforts to divert pressure from strained French divisions were wrecked in costly fighting along the Somme. Trench warfare had become an almost unstoppable process that consumed endless numbers of Allied and Central Powers troops, and by summer 1917 the Allies faced a serious shortage of men. Americans were the main hope for avoiding defeat in 1918.

Pershing knew the British and French wanted his men as replacements in their thinning ranks, but with full authority from Wilson and Baker to run the U.S. effort in France and fearing that piecemeal distribution of his "doughboys" would only waste them he resolved to build a separate American army of one million men. He argued that a strong U.S. Army could shoulder the main

effort by 1919 and yielded only in such moments of crisis as the German drive toward the English Channel in March 1918. When the Germans launched their "final push" in the summer of 1918, Pershing let U.S. divisions help the French and British and offered total cooperation to the newly selected Allied supreme commander, General Ferdinand Foch. Pershing's protection of the United States's position was an outstanding accomplishment.

On 12 September 1918 he commanded the U.S. First Army's attack against the St. Mihiel salient. Planned and organized entirely by American officers--especially by [George C. Marshall](#)--this initial American offensive cleared the salient by 13 September. American confidence soared. Allies carped at the amateurish organization and procedures, but veteran German observers were dismayed by the fresh valor of Pershing's men. Having seen Americans charge under their own artillery fire, the Germans rated them as shock troops.

Pershing's staff planned a rapid extraction of most of the First Army's divisions from the St. Mihiel area; they would move thirty miles north in time to launch a late-September offensive in the Meuse-Argonne sector. Allied experts doubted so complicated a move could be made, even by veterans, in so short a time, but the U.S. First Army began the Meuse-Argonne attack on 26 September 1918. The initial objectives of Montfaucon and securing the AEF's right flank against the west side of the Meuse were achieved in a day and a half. Progress stalled after the first few days. Pershing stepped up to army group command and turned the First Army over to Lieutenant General [Hunter Liggett](#) in mid-October. Fighting intensified across the Meuse. In the Aire valley doughboys struggled in dense forests to wrest villages from the enemy in hand to hand combat. By 11 October the Americans had broken out of the Argonne, and by the first week of November they were pushing toward Sedan. When Germany sued for peace, Pershing went to Paris for peace talks and joined in the wild celebration of the armistice on 11 November 1918.

Jealous of the reputation of his men and his armies (he had formed the Second and Third armies toward the war's end), Pershing resented Allied hints that success came in spite of bumbling U.S. efforts. Clearly American fighting in Belleau Wood and at Château Thierry and American cooperation with the French in attacking the Marne salient in July 1918 did much to smash this last German drive of the war. It was American courage, ingenuity, and perseverance that made the difference in 1918. He knew that most American errors stemmed from inexperience and noted that his men were quick studies. Had the war continued into 1919, as many expected, he knew his army would have dominated the war. He and Secretary of War Baker enjoyed a model partnership. Baker rated Pershing's overall performance outstanding and his handling of the Allied and neutral leaders superb.

Pershing's duties continued during the limited occupation of German border zones and as the U.S. Army was shipped home, and while in Europe he enjoyed some trappings of fame. On 1 September 1919 he sailed from Brest, France, for New York on the SS *Leviathan*. At sea on 5 September, a message came that opened a new world to a general feeling slightly supernumerary. He had been promoted to be general of the armies--a rank previously held only by [George Washington](#). Status had now outreached his considerable ambition. Secretary Baker waited at the gangplank to begin an astounding welcome for a hero; Pershing was engulfed in admiration. First he led a triumphal AEF parade in New York City on 10 September, then on 18 September he addressed a Joint Session of Congress, where he praised his men and their deeds.

Pershing soon became army chief of staff, but before taking the post on 13 May 1921 he testified before Congress concerning the National Defense Act of 1920, an act designed to construct the peacetime U.S. forces. Pershing warned against rash economies of size and scope, predicting troubles would rise again because the Allies had not marched to Berlin in 1918. Isolationist sentiment muffled his warnings. As chief of staff Pershing concentrated on making the best of smaller numbers and on maintaining the efficiency of the officer corps by keeping an eye on such rising stars as George Marshall, George Patton, [Dwight Eisenhower](#), and a small cadre of possible future leaders known as "Pershing's men."

Retirement from the chief of staff's post on 13 September 1924 brought more time for friends and for Warren, who had been raised with relatives and felt estranged from his father. In the 1920s and 1930s the two grew close and became friends, spending winters in Arizona and summers in New York and sometimes in Europe.

He permitted his name to circulate for the Republican presidential nomination in 1924, but nothing came of it. He turned to ceremonial duties, some frustrating diplomacy in South America, and service on the American Battle Monuments Commission, which was charged with marking the AEF's fields. Much of his time was spent writing his memoirs. Published in 1931, *My Experiences in the World War* reflected Pershing's unadorned, highly personal judgments of men and events and admiration for his armies. It won the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1932.

During the 1930s and 1940s heart trouble plagued him. While war was building in Europe, he moved to an apartment in Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington to be near his favorite doctor, Dr. Shelley Marietta. There he was visited almost daily by Michiline Resco, whom he had met in Paris. They were married secretly on 2 September 1946.

When the United States entered the Second World War, Pershing offered his services to President [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#), who refused them saying, "you are magnificent." Roosevelt listened when Pershing (who had done so much to create the modern U.S. Army) urged George Marshall as the only man capable of being chief of staff in a two-front war. On 13 September 1945 President [Harry Truman](#) sent him a birthday message. "This should be one of the happiest of your many birthdays as you remember that this time we went all the way through to Berlin, as you counseled in 1918. I hail a great soldier who happily exemplified also the vision of the statesman." Pershing died at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, D.C.

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## Bibliography

Most of John J. Pershing's papers are in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress; the Center of Military History, Washington, D.C.; the New York Public Library; and the U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa. The most accessible modern accounts of his life are George MacAdam, "The Life of General Pershing," *World's Work* 37-39 (Nov. 1918 through Dec. 1919); Richard O'Connor, *Black Jack Pershing* (1961); and Frederick Palmer, *John J.*

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Frank E. Vandiver