



In the Line

"War and training is mud and rain and cold."

BY the end of November the 1st Division, in accord with its schedule, was out of the line and back in training at Gondrecourt. Meanwhile the build-up of American forces in Lorraine had begun. Headquarters of the 2d Division, which like the 1st was being shipped in separate units (including two regiments of Marines to form one brigade), arrived in October. First elements of the 26th Division had appeared in September. Before the end of the year the 42d was also assembling, and elsewhere in France the 41st training and replacement division was coming in. There was already perceptible momentum in the build-up toward the twenty-four divisions that Pershing had asked to have sent him before the end of June 1918.¹ Yet to the hard-pressed Allies the process still seemed maddeningly slow.

All the war news was bad, and the need for American reinforcements in quantity became ever more urgent. Field Marshal Haig's offensive in Flanders (July-November 1917) had cost him a quarter of a million men and gained only a few miles without effecting a breakthrough. The British Expeditionary Force at the end of 1917 was nearly one hundred thousand men smaller than it had been the year before, and there were not enough men left at home to make up the deficit.² The French, in the same cruel

state of exhaustion, had had to disband one hundred separate battalions for lack of replacements.³ In October the Italian front was shattered as Austro-German forces at Caporetto broke through to a depth of sixty miles and took two hundred and seventy-five thousand Italian prisoners. Worse still was the word from the East. While the armies of the Czar had demonstrated their incompetence in the first month of the war, it was expected at least that they would be able to hold their own, tying down substantial German forces which could otherwise be shifted to the Western Front. When the March 1917 revolution forced the Czar to abdicate, that expectation brightened, but the Kerensky government proved to have neither the hoped-for political vigor nor the capacity to stiffen the Russian armies. The Russian summer offensive failed, and in the fall the Bolsheviks overthrew Kerensky and at once began negotiating for an armistice. General Pershing estimated that Russia's withdrawal would permit the Germans to concentrate two hundred and fifty to two hundred and sixty divisions in France against an Allied force of one hundred and sixty. He reiterated his earlier request for twenty-four divisions (with supporting troops amounting to about one million men) by next July.⁴

Against this requirement the troops actually on hand seemed even to him discouragingly few. The British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, seized this moment of desperate impatience again to urge integration. He proposed that American reinforcements could be got into action much faster if the Americans would ship only infantry and machine-gun units to be permanently absorbed in British units. The French countered with fresh suggestions that American battalions and regiments be attached to French divisions for periods of two to three months, for full battle service, not, as was being done, for training only. Pershing found the French move easy enough to reject, even though he was conscious that in withholding his troops from battle he accepted the heavy responsibility that while he waited the war might be lost. The British gambit was harder to meet, for they offered a *quid pro quo*—additional British shipping sufficient to transport six divisions over and above the twenty-four already scheduled. Eventually a compromise was worked out to

ship six extra whole divisions (not just infantry) but to commit the infantry battalions and regiments with British units for battle training, pending the arrival of supporting troops.⁵

Under this kind of pressure General Pershing felt it necessary to get the 1st Division into action quickly. He was determined to relieve General Sibert. This was done by War Department orders on December 12, and two days later Brigadier General Robert Lee Bullard, who had been commanding the division's 2d Brigade, replaced him.⁶ Marshall by this time had taken a leap up the wartime promotion ladder. Recommended in September by Sibert for promotion to lieutenant colonel, he was made a major by orders received in November and would have his silver leaves just after Christmas.⁷ He was also in line for appointment as chief of staff to the new commander. This he did not know, and he was so infuriated by Sibert's relief, which he considered unjust and unwarranted, that once more he expressed himself with great vehemence. He thought that Pershing's staff was to blame and that, in response to the boss's severity, they were outdoing him without even knowing "what they were being severe about." He discovered later that Bullard learned of his anger and decided that Marshall had no business being chief of staff as long as he was in that state of mind. The top place on the staff went to Lieutenant Colonel Campbell King. Marshall remained chief of operations, sobered and resolved in the future to curb his temper.

Bullard was a slim, tough, aggressive, self-confident Southerner, born in Alabama, who had fought Indians in the West and had served in the Philippines and in Mexico. With a warning to his subordinate commanders that they would be relieved without hesitation if they failed to measure up, Bullard at once set the division a final stiff training requirement designed to make it, in his own words, "a machine that will work independently of the quality of the man that turns the crank."⁸ By mid-January the men were ready and the 1st Brigade relieved the French 1st Moroccan Division of the First French Army in the line north of Toul, between St.-Mihiel and Pont-à-Mousson. The 18th Infantry went into the line on January 16 after an exhausting march over ice-glazed roads through a heavy cold rain.

War is many things, and the poets and novelists have taxed their

imaginations to re-create its terrors, its boredom, its spiritual triumphs, its miseries. But for the foot soldier war is above all mud. All other sufferings are intermittent: mud is the condition of existence. There never was a war more deeply mired in mud than the war on the Western Front. The trenches taken over by the 18th Infantry were awash and the soldiers manned them in hip boots, shivering in a defensive line under direct observation of the enemy atop Montsec.

As a staff officer Marshall did not live in the mud but he was up at the front frequently and acquired a deep and abiding sympathy for the infantrymen that he never lost. "The poor devil in the Army," he said later, "marches tremendous distances; he is in the mud; he's filthy dirty; he hasn't had a full meal . . . and he fights in a place he has never seen before. . . ."

About a month after the 1st Division troops moved into the line German artillery fire, which had been light and sporadic, began to register on an area near Seicheprey. The fact was noted and reported by the regimental intelligence officer, Captain Charles Coulter. It happened also to be observed by Marshall on one of his frequent trips to the division's forward headquarters at Mesnil-la-Tour, this time in company of French liaison officer Captain Germain Seligman. Marshall at once prepared a warning directive for General Bullard's signature. Thus fully alerted to probable enemy action, the 18th Infantry pulled back from the forward trenches, leaving men only in the automatic rifle pits. As expected, Germans attacked with gas on the twenty-sixth and followed on the morning of March 1 with a raid in force.⁹ The men of the 18th Infantry, like veterans, had ducked the one and strongly countered the other. With few casualties themselves, they took heavy toll of the attackers. Though not a large action, it was handled skillfully and the French were delighted. Premier Georges Clemenceau himself came down two days later to award the Croix de Guerre and express the gratitude of France. The promptness with which the French rewarded valor in contrast to the slower American system—Marshall discovered that the men decorated by Clemenceau were not given medals by their own units until weeks later—made a deep impression on him. From this and other episodes grew his determination that if he

at any time in the future controlled the giving of awards, he would see that they were distributed promptly. It meant more, he insisted, when the award was made in the presence of those who had shared in the action.¹⁰

The pressure on the 1st Division did not let up. Bullard ordered a number of raids, small ones, but prepared with meticulous care under the critical eyes of higher command. Pershing so closely followed their efforts that Marshall, determined to prevent any slips, wrote out for one important raid a four-page order for Bullard's signature and followed it up with detailed instructions for the leaders of the raiding parties. To make certain that they were completely informed of the division's wishes, he kept an officer on his staff in constant touch with the raiding party commanders.¹¹ Of the close supervision from First Army, Bullard later wrote: "I never expect to see as much counsel and advice taken upon the subject of a military operation, great or small."¹² American behavior in the attack was of particular concern to General Pershing, who continued to believe that the hope for ultimate success lay in freeing the infantry from the trenches. He thought the Allies in three years had become so wedded to the principles of static warfare that their offensive spirit was dulled. He insisted on emphasizing mobile tactics and hoped that American skills and aggressiveness might at last contribute materially to a decision. So the 1st Division raids were fully reported and studied by other American units in training. In March, Marshall was detached from the division to lecture on them at the American General Staff College at Langres, the most advanced of several officer schools that Pershing had established in France.¹³

It was now almost nine months since the first American troops had arrived in France. Five combat divisions and one training division were on hand. The I Corps under Major General Hunter Liggett, which, according to Pershing's plan, was to establish an American combat zone, had been formed in January. But the corps with its supporting troops would not be ready to fight for another six months. The divisions were still in training and, except for the 1st, had had no experience with independent action in the line. This was the moment of crisis. While the Atlantic Ferry was stepping up delivery of troops (85,000 in March, 120,-

000 in April, well over an average of 250,000 a month during the summer), promising a possibly decisive increment to Allied strength in the course of the year, the Allies in the spring of 1918 were at their weakest.

It was obvious to the German command that this was the moment to try for a decision. It had been just as obvious to the Allied command that the blow could be expected as soon as weather permitted. In January, General Tasker Bliss, recently retired as Chief of Staff, and then American military representative on the Supreme War Council, thought the British were already jittery. "They all seemed to be badly rattled," he wrote to Secretary of War Baker, "They showed me their information indicating that the Germans have already secured a decided superiority in men and guns on the Western Front. They anticipate a tremendous effort by the Germans early in the year."¹⁴

What they anticipated came on March 21, with the first of the German offensives aimed at smashing the Western Allies before the AEF could get into action.

Marshall was at Langres when the blow struck and was almost immediately ordered to rejoin his division. The German attack, carefully planned and massive in execution, hit the British Fifth Army of General Sir Herbert Gough and the Third Army of General Julian Byng along a fifty-mile front from Arras to the River Oise. The enemy objective was to split the French and British forces, roll up the British flank against the Channel, and so leave the road to Paris open. It gained early success. Gough's army was pushed back. As a gap threatened on the French left flank, General Pétain, concerned with the defense of Paris, pulled General Debeney's First French Army out of the Toul sector. He asked Pershing to stretch the 1st Division into the hole around Toul and to bring up the 42d and 26th Divisions as quickly as possible. By March 28 people were beginning to leave Paris under sporadic shelling from German long-range guns. There was talk that the government might move to Bordeaux—the first such speculation since August 1914. Pershing, who had always qualified his insistence on a separate American Army with the proviso that in an emergency he would not withhold his troops, now went to Pétain and offered his divisions for use wherever the

French general felt he needed them. But, for the moment, Pétain asked only that the 1st Division be moved from Lorraine to the front in Picardy.

The move, begun on March 31, took place after the German drive had been checked. The troops were unloaded at Méru near Paris and marched to the training area near Gisors. Marshall, detailed to meet the French troop trains and supervise the unloading of men of the 1st Division, was deeply impressed by the skill of the French in handling great masses of troops—"a great demonstration," he said later, "of the highest form of troop movement."

The 1st Division was engaged in exercises in open warfare when on April 9 a second German offensive hit the British left flank in Flanders between the La Bassée Canal and Armentières. Again there was thought of immediate commitment, but again the emergency passed.

Recognizing the crescendo of the German effort, the Allies were driven at long last to submerge their mutual jealousies and fears and establish a unified command, the lack of which had plagued the whole conduct of the war and perhaps deprived them of earlier victory. At the height of the first crisis (March 26) Marshal Foch was given the authority to co-ordinate action on the whole front. On April 3, in anticipation of the next German drive, he was given "strategic direction" pending his formal appointment on April 24 as Allied commander-in-chief. In the agreement to set up the supreme command Pershing secured specific mention of the American Army, which he hoped would nail down his long fight to be assured independent action.

But for the moment Allied offensive ideas had to be shelved. General Foch awaited the third enemy drive and tried to guess where it would come. On April 24 the 1st Division with the 16th and 18th Regiments went into the line in Picardy, relieving French units west of Montdidier. This was at the tip of the salient which the Germans had driven into the Allied lines in March but had been comparatively quiet since. Foch was not reinforcing the line but freeing French troops with which he hoped to build a reserve.

Quiet was a relative term. In fact during the first month in the

trenches the division took heavy punishment from German artillery and gas. One mustard gas attack in particular on May 3 forced the evacuation of eight to nine hundred soldiers to the rear. Division forward headquarters located in the manor house at Mesnil-St. Firmin, within a mile of the railroad station and an ammunition dump, was under almost constant enemy shell fire. Marshall, trying to escape from the damp airless cellar where the staff worked, slept at first upstairs, "but they drove me down when they began hitting this building with eight-inch shells which sounded like the end of the world."

Marshall at this period was working hard, accepting, as usual, at least his full share of responsibility. General Bullard leaned on him perhaps more than he ordinarily would have because, though full of fighting spirit, Bullard was not well. He had had a bad attack of neuritis in his shoulder just before the division went into the line—so bad that he was hospitalized for several days.¹⁵ He got himself out just as Foch was asking Pershing to name another officer to command the division. Thereafter Bullard was in almost constant pain, of which he wrote later: "All my life I had known sickness and suffering; nothing equal to this"; adding with characteristic assurance, "but for it a livelier story, I am sure, would have been enacted to be written of the war where I was."¹⁶ As his chief of operations, Marshall was not only the mainstay of his planning staff but to a large extent his executive, constantly visiting front-line units, seeking information, often riding horseback through areas where shells were falling, explaining patiently to lower commanders what they were to do and why. He was officially commended for his bravery in carrying out his duties under fire.¹⁷

Marshall was a superlative staff officer—the job for which his whole career had been a preparation—but he was not altogether happy about it. Prominence and promotion were to be had at the front in command of troops. Some of his colleagues of the earliest days in France who had been given commands already wore generals' stars. It was decidedly uncomfortable for a professional whose branch was infantry to remain at headquarters, and not simply because there tended to be up front a feeling that officers of the General Staff, branded by a distinctive

band around the sleeve, had easy, safe jobs. Troop-leading was after all the real business of war, to which everything else was ancillary. Marshall, furthermore, despite his excellence as a tactician, had been drawn into the Army through a taste and aptitude for commanding men. Finally the staff job, whether relatively safe or not, could be tedious. Marshall, as he later confessed, was beginning to get tired out "from the incessant strain of office work."¹⁸

He could make no serious move to change, however, until he could be spared. At the moment he had his hands full. In mid-May it was decided that the 1st Division should make an attack. The objective was the village of Cantigny, little more than a crossroads, four miles north and west of Montdidier. Occupying a plateau, Cantigny provided a good observation point for German artillery: this was the tactical justification for trying to take it. But far the more important reason for the attack was psychological—or, more accurately in military terminology, moral. Pershing was eager to prove the mettle of American troops. A success in attack would give them confidence, and the Allies confidence in them, and so would further strengthen his insistence on independent American action. It would boost morale in France and at home. It might correspondingly appear to the Germans discouragingly like the beginning of the end.¹⁹

The attack was meticulously planned. Marshall did at least some of the basic work,²⁰ and on May 19 when General Pershing visited division headquarters Marshall expressed his own confidence in success. One regiment, the 28th Infantry, was to make the attack with the support of French tanks, French and American artillery, and French planes. Detailed orders from division, regiment, and battalion assured that each man knew what he was to do. In addition the 28th Infantry rehearsed for a week behind the lines. In the early morning of May 28 supporting artillery laid down a heavy preparation, and the regiment, under command of Colonel Hanson E. Ely, jumped off at five forty-five. The enemy was surprised. Resistance was light, and before breakfast the village was in American hands.²¹

Hard fighting came later as the Germans for three days launched determined counterattacks to retake the village. In the

course of these battles a lieutenant came angrily into 1st Division headquarters to ask why his machine-gun company had been ordered in to repel the Germans when it had only just been relieved from the line. Marshall, patient and understanding as he ordinarily was, except when faced with injustice or stupidity, talked quietly to him. The reason his men were sent back in was because it was so vital to hold Cantigny and it was thought that his company could do the job. "I left," the lieutenant said long afterward, "with a feeling of added pride in my outfit, which I transmitted on my return to my unit, [and this] restored officers and men to top combat efficiency." ²²

All the German attacks—there were seven before the end of the month—were beaten back, and the Americans consolidated their new line. Considering the gains in ground—from 300 to 1600 yards on a 2200-yard front—1st Division losses of 199 killed, 652 wounded, 200 gassed, and 16 missing constituted a heavy price.²³ But as the first American success in the open warfare for which they were being especially trained the attack seemed to General Pershing well worth while.

He saw to it that a prompt communiqué reached the newspapers at home and cabled his enthusiasm to the War Department: "The affair at Cantigny on the twenty-eighth was well planned and splendidly executed. Our staff work was excellent. . . . The Allies are in high praise of our troops." The job, he thought, had fully justified his faith and stubbornness. "This action emphasizes the importance of organizing our own divisions and higher units as soon as circumstances permit. Our troops are the best in Europe and our staffs are the equal of any." ²⁴

For the French, as it turned out, Cantigny was only a tiny bright spot in general gloom. For the day before the 1st Division jumped off, the Germans had begun their third great offensive with immediate and deeply alarming success. Selecting a sector of the Allied front that had been considered too rugged to be attacked successfully, the Germans achieved complete surprise. The Chemin des Dames ridge, to which tired French and British units had been sent to recuperate, was overwhelmed in the first hours. Within eight days the Germans reached the Marne, from which they had been driven back in 1914. Pétain threw in all available reserves including the American 2d and 3d Divisions,

which fought well to blunt the cutting edge of the German attack at Belleau Wood and Château-Thierry. The 1st Division, scheduled to be relieved by the 2d, was forced instead to extend its sector to the left as far as Grivesnes in order to free French units for use along the Marne. Considerably west of the German penetration, the 1st Division was not under attack but, aware that this was the climactic enemy effort, the combat units prepared for the worst. Marshall organized the division's noncombatants from the supply trains and technical services into two scratch battalions, one commanded by the division adjutant, the other by the judge advocate.²⁵ When the new commanders reported for instructions Marshall's assistant took them to a window from which they could see a valley and a railroad. Pointing, he said, "You are to die east of the railroad. That is all the order you need."

Despite the touch of melodrama, that was fair measure of the grimness of the Allied mood. But the crisis was overestimated. By the first week in June the enemy penetration was contained and the Marne salient, deep and threatening as it looked on the map, became a German liability. Hard fighting at the tip prevented a breakout; hard fighting at the shoulders, at Reims on the east and later in the valley of the Oise on the west, prevented the Germans from widening the base of the attack. In these circumstances the abundance of combat troops in the salient was an embarrassment to the German command, committing it to pursuing this battle and no other and consequently inviting the Allies to concentrate in defense and in time to fall in against the flanks. The time for counterattack was to come after a last-ditch enemy attempt to widen and deepen the penetration in July had failed.

Before that happened the 1st Division, showing signs of strain and fatigue, had been pulled out of the line. Its losses in two months, mostly in static defense, came to 38 officers and 728 men killed; 75 officers and 1789 men wounded; 43 officers and 1733 men evacuated as the result of gas.²⁶

Although he did not know it at once, Marshall had seen his last service with the division with which he had lived and fought for a year. Four months earlier, on March 9, General Harbord, Pershing's chief of staff, had sent Major Hjalmer Erickson down to

the division to be trained as chief of operations so that Marshall could be released for duty in the Operations Division of GHQ.²⁷ The shift was to be made, however, only when General Liggett's I Corps and General Bullard agreed. Meanwhile Marshall himself had been trying for troop duty. On June 18 he had written asking to be relieved from the General Staff and assigned to troops. He wrote under the impetus of special frustration, knowing that General Bullard's attempt to get a full colonelcy for him had just been turned down on grounds that the War Department was opposed to giving this rank to anyone but combat commanders. General Bullard forwarded the June 18 letter but did not add his approval. Marshall, he thought, was far too valuable in staff work. "I doubt," he wrote, "that in this, whether it be teaching or practice, he has an equal in the Army today."²⁸ It was hard to be penalized, in effect, for special excellence, especially when there were others who wished to see him in command of troops. Major General George B. Duncan (commander of the 77th Division, organized and commanded briefly by General Bell before age and health made it necessary to give the unit to a younger man) in early July proposed to GHQ that Marshall be given a star and command of a brigade. Brigadier General Wilson B. Burtt, chief of staff of the newly formed V Corps, at the same time listed Marshall among several other officers recommended to First Army for regimental command.²⁹ It was not to be. (He had to be content with a full colonelcy, which he received at First Army September 21, 1918.)

When Marshall's letter reached I Corps, its chief of staff, Colonel Malin Craig, noted in an endorsement that he would be glad to have Marshall's services at corps. The letter then passed through channels to GHQ and there reminded its new chief of staff, Brigadier General James V. McAndrew—Harbord had meanwhile been given command of the 2d Division—that Marshall had been spoken for some months earlier. So he renewed the request for transfer, to take place as soon as the division was relieved. There was no difficulty about this release. General Bullard was leaving himself soon to take over the III Corps. Orders to duty with GHQ came on July 13.³⁰