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The First Division in France

"We hadn't even been trained in squads left and squads right."

THERE had been exultation in France when General Pershing and his staff arrived early in June. At last the Americans had come. Parisians lined the streets and showered roses on the open staff cars in which the General and his officers rode from the station to their hotel.[1] Pershing, erect and dignified, assured in manner and with a "fine sense of the dramatic," looked like the military savior that every Frenchman wished to believe he was. Within days of his arrival his chief of staff thought that he had "captured the fickle Paris crowd at any rate." [2]

France was impatient and wanted not the promise of eventual victory but a miracle of immediate deliverance. France was desperate. On April 16 General Robert Nivelle, newly appointed French commander-in-chief, had launched an offensive with twenty-seven divisions against the German lines along the Aisne. Both army and nation were led to believe the attack would break the long stalemate and end the war. It failed. The Germans were ready for it, and the French command lost confidence even before the guns opened fire. There was no breakthrough, only more French casualties, some ninety-five thousand, of which some fifteen thousand were dead. So shattered was the morale of the

disappointed army that mutiny infected sixteen corps. Nivelle was replaced by General Philippe Pétain, who in time, by a combination of toughness and understanding, would put the army back together again. Meanwhile the darkness of defeat and of cheated hopes remained like a pall over the whole of France.

It was three weeks after Pershing's staff had settled into Paris headquarters for the long, hard work of planning before the troops of the 1st Division began debarking on June 26 at St.-Nazaire.[3] Then once more the French cheered, and the procession of one battalion of the 16th Infantry in Paris on the Fourth of July rekindled the extravagant enthusiasm of Pershing's own reception. But like rockets in the dark, cheers for the Yanks broke through the gloom of France without lightening it. Captain Marshall, who stepped off the boat just behind General Sibert and so was the second man ashore in the first convoy of American troops, was impressed with the number of women in mourning—nearly everyone—and later with the depressing quiet of the people. "Everyone seemed to be on the verge of tears." Admiral Albert Gleaves, commander of the convoy, thought he detected in the silence an "unuttered thanksgiving." [4] Marshall felt only the grief, the exhaustion of the capacity to hope. "The Canadians had come and were going to settle the war in a month or two and nothing happened." Now the Americans were here and still nothing happened. The war went on.

Indeed, even those who cheered loudest could see that the Yanks who were arriving were at best a promise, hastily collected, of more substantial help still a long way off. The 1st Division set up a reception camp near St.-Nazaire and waited for the three remaining convoys of troops to arrive. Already the grave deficiencies of almost all units were known in part—that many recruits had received their rifles only just before boarding ship in New York, that newly organized units like the howitzer companies, mortar sections, and 37 mm. cannon crews not only had no howitzers, mortars, or cannon but "had never even heard of them." As for their training, even their officers knew scarcely anything about the conditions of battle on the Western Front. Some on board ship had had a look at a single copy of a recently published booklet on trench warfare, borrowed from a British officer.[5]

Veterans of the Mexican expedition were intermingled with the rawest recruits who didn't even look like soldiers. They were "all stiff-legged, pasty, and somewhat unkempt." [6] Marshall one day observed a sentry at the St.-Nazaire camp attempt to salute the French area commander who had come to make an official call on General Sibert. The soldier, a tall, rangy Tennesseean, had his blouse unbuttoned and a watch chain stretched across his stomach. When the French officer, resplendent in a bemedaled dress uniform, stopped, apparently to ask the sentry about his rifle, the latter handed it over and seated himself on a nearby post to roll a cigarette.[7] That incident and others like it created an impression of bumbling amateurism in the minds of many in the French command which for a long time they insisted on believing was typical of the American Army.

In fact it was one more sign of unpreparedness and of the haste with which the first troops were gathered and shipped to "show the flag." They were not a combat division at all, but only the raw material for one sent over for assembly in France instead of at home. Months would pass before the division could be shaped to fight and more months before it could be committed as part of an army capable of sustaining itself in the line. Even before General Pershing arrived, the American Military Mission in Paris had discussed and reached tentative agreement on a training ground for United States troops. The requirement was for a relatively quiet area near the line where the Americans might eventually take over their own combat zone. Since the British and Belgians were established on the left wing and the French inevitably were massed in the center before Paris, the obvious place for the Americans was in Lorraine on the right, where there had been little more than local action since the initial German drive in August 1914. Specifically the training area suggested by the French and accepted by General Pershing was the country around Neufchâteau. For eventual commitment, the thought was that Pershing might consider Metz and the St.-Mihiel salient as objectives.

Pershing intended to bring into Lorraine as rapidly as possible four divisions: the 2d (regular Army to which Marine units would be added), the 26th (New England National Guard units), and the 42d (the Rainbow Division with National Guard

units from twenty-seven states), besides the 1st. He wished them all located for training as close together as practicable. In mid-July, after going from St.-Nazaire to Paris to witness the Bastille Day parade, General Sibert with Colonel Coe, his chief of staff, Marshall, and other members of the staff set out by car to establish 1st Division headquarters at Gondrecourt and prepare the way for movement of the division units to billets in a half-dozen surrounding villages.[8]

Marshall was delighted with the area, not only as a soldier but as one sensitive from boyhood to the gentle beauties of rich, rolling country. In a later report to Pershing's headquarters he did not note the haze that mutes the colors of the countryside, the red roofs of the little villages, the trees that lined each road and bounded each field in the way of a land that has been combed and groomed by the peasant's plow for centuries. But his appreciation of the soft and peaceful land on the threshold of war crept in. He wrote of the "broad fertile valleys, bordered by high hills, . . . well watered, not too heavily timbered for military training, devoted largely to hay and grain crops and dotted with villages above the average in appearance." He added, "It appears to be healthful, is beautiful, and seems adequately adapted for training." [9]

The 1st Division headquarters set up in Gondrecourt, a town of two thousand, twenty miles northwest of Neufchâteau, typically with houses crowded snugly on narrow streets, its nucleus a public square and an ancient church, staid and sleepy, even though, since the time the grandsons of Charlemagne quarreled over their inheritance, Lorraine had been repeatedly a battlefield. Not far away was the village of Domremy from whence the peasant girl Jeanne, nearly five hundred years before, had gone off to battle to save her beloved France. Almost every day Marshall passed by the house where she was born and the reconstructed church where she was baptized, and he was reminded of her story.[10]

Marshall was billeted with two other American officers and the French interpreter, Captain Jean Hugo, at the house of M. and Mme. Jouatte on the Rue Saussi not far from American headquarters.[11] Mme. Jouatte, whose son was in service, made her

guests warmly at home. Marshall, fond of her and grateful, kept in touch with her until her death years later. When after more than a quarter-century American troops came once more to Lorraine, General George Patton paused for a moment in his drive through France to inquire, at the Chief of Staff's direction, how she had fared under the Germans. Four years later it was the American Secretary of State who, with Mrs. Marshall and three aides, stopped in Gondrecourt to bring gifts and recollections of long ago.[12]

Before he could become settled in his new billet, Marshall was on the move by order of Pershing headquarters. His old friend Colonel John McAuley Palmer, Pershing's chief of operations, had decided to borrow him to survey the whole region of Neufchâteau to locate training areas and suitable billets for the three divisions which were to come over later in the year. Palmer's whole instructions were to "do what you think best." [13]

At Neufchâteau the town officials arranged a lunch. As Marshall and his sergeant were the first Americans to make an official visit a crowd gathered outside their restaurant and after the meal there were speeches of welcome to which the captain was invited to respond. Calling on the uttermost resources of his VMI French, he said all that he could find words for. Later he could not recall having used a single verb, but it didn't matter. The crowd, "voluble, friendly, and excited," applauded and cheered. The schoolchildren of Neufchâteau, let out for the day, then formed an escort to conduct him on his tour of inspection.[14]

He was on the whole pleased with what he found and thought the accommodations better than those in and around Gondrecourt, where there was no shelter for the kitchens and the men would have to eat out in the weather. Even comparatively good billets were meager enough. Soldiers generally were to be housed in the lofts of stables with a single mattress and blanket supplied for two men. For that the charge normally was about five cents a day; for a roof only—whether for man or mule—the rate was less than a penny.[15] At the end of July, Marshall reported his findings and was ordered to return to his division to begin at once planning its training program.

Eager to get soldiers in the line as soon as possible, the French

wanted training in trench warfare to begin at once. Marshall believed it necessary to begin further back on elementary drill, to make soldiers of the recruits and military units out of the collections of men. General Sibert agreed, and the initial training order laid down that "all possible means will be employed with the utmost vigor to improve the appearance, military bearing, and spirit of the officers and soldiers of this command." [16] A month would be devoted to the task. Junior officers of the command took over this part of the training while General Sibert and most of the officers not involved in the drilling joined French units in the line near Verdun. It was during the Second French Army's attack in support of General Sir Douglas Haig's offensive in Flanders that Marshall, with the Foreign Legion regiment of the 1st Moroccan Division, observed the battle on August 20 in which the Germans were driven back, leaving some ten thousand prisoners.[17]

There was still at this time no firm plan for the use of American troops. From the moment of the declaration of war, when the French and British missions in Washington were urging the Americans to come quickly, the Allies had been arguing for the integration of American soldiers in French and British units. The generalship of the past three years had accomplished nothing more successfully than to kill off the young manhood of Europe. Now that the manpower reservoirs of Britain and France were so low that neither could any longer make good the losses of daily attrition in the trenches, much less build up for offensives, the Allies looked hungrily at America's untapped supply. When the immediate and urgent need was for soldiers to fill the trenches, man the guns, and be fed to the slaughter of enemy guns, they thought it foolhardy to take the time to form a complete and self-sufficient national army. Furthermore, why take the unnecessary risk of committing them to battle under inexperienced American command when the British and French had plenty of seasoned officers begging for men to command? General Pershing was well aware of both risks—the delay and the inexperience—but he remained adamant against integration, both because politically it would, he thought, submerge the American effort and bind America absolutely to French and British war

aims, and because he believed that as the war continued, the American contribution would become increasingly large and even dominant. All through 1917 and into early months of 1918 he and his staff fought off an ingenious variety of integrating schemes.

As a unit, the 1st Division could not be put into the line until at least one other trained division arrived to support it. The normal procedure was to rotate divisions between line and reserve every three or four days. Since, furthermore, casualties might be very high (in extreme cases three-quarters of a division could be put out of action in a day), General Pershing did not want to commit any until the four he had planned to concentrate were ready. It was to be a long, difficult, and often exasperating wait.

Impatience meanwhile tended to become focused as through a burning glass on the 1st Division. At the end of August, training for battle began under the tutelage of the 47th Division of the Chasseurs Alpins, the crack unit known as the "Blue Devils." General Pershing's headquarters had moved out of Paris to the casern at Chaumont, only about an hour's drive from Gondrecourt. From this time on the 1st Division was under the constant critical eye of both General Pershing and the French high command. Pershing came over frequently on short notice to check on the progress of training, often with a distinguished French guest. These were difficult moments, made more difficult by general headquarters' doubts as to General Sibert's competence and corresponding suspicions at 1st Division headquarters that Pershing was trying to establish grounds to relieve him. There was a strong feeling at GHQ that an engineer officer, however able, ought not to have an infantry command and that, besides, Sibert was unmilitary in his bearing and weak on discipline.[18] Nevertheless, at the division, Sibert commanded the loyalty of his staff, and notably of Captain Marshall.

So a sense of injustice was stirred early in September when Pershing ordered a review of the division at Houdelaincourt for President Poincaré. Notice of the review reached the division only the afternoon before it was to be held and found units scattered over an area twenty to thirty miles distant. Two units, on the road all day, had to march most of the night to arrive on time.

Marshall, in charge of arrangements, did not get around to selecting the ground until late evening and so failed to notice that the hillside he picked was already churned by previous drills and ankle-deep in mud. Two-thirds of the men and half the officers had had in all their lives only the month's drilling they had just completed; all were now hard at work on combat training. In these circumstances the review was understandably ragged and General Pershing afterward duly noted the extenuating difficulties, but at the moment he was only aware that the troops could not have made a good impression on the French President and he took out his chagrin on General Sibert.[19]

This was a prelude to the blow-up of October 3 when Pershing visited "Washington Center," where the French were conducting training in trench warfare. On hearing of the forthcoming visit Marshall arranged to have Major Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., who commanded the 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry, demonstrate a method he had developed for attacking an entrenched enemy. After the demonstration Pershing asked General Sibert to conduct a critique. Sibert had witnessed the demonstration for the first time himself and his comments evidently reflected that fact. Pershing then listened to a discussion by a junior officer and then "just gave everybody hell." He said the division didn't show much evidence of training, had made poor use of its time, and had not followed directives. The worst, in Marshall's view, was that "he was very severe with General Sibert in front of all the officers." Finally, turning to Sibert's chief of staff, who had arrived only two days before, Pershing grilled him on matters that Marshall, as acting chief of staff, had been handling. Again there were faltering replies. Pershing dismissed the chief of staff with an expression of contempt and turned to leave.

Marshall, stung at the manifest injustice, tossed aside the caution that a junior officer could be expected to feel on such an occasion. He decided that, whatever the cost to him, he had to explain some things. He began to talk. Pershing, in no mood to listen, shrugged his shoulders and turned away. Marshall, "mad all over," put his hand on the general's arm.

"General Pershing," he said, "there's something to be said here and I think I should say it because I've been here longest."

Pershing stopped. "What have you got to say?"

Exactly what the irate captain had to say was not recorded and afterward he could not remember. An associate of these days has said that in anger Marshall talked very fast and overwhelmed his adversary with "a torrent of facts." Marshall himself recalled that he "had an inspired moment" and that his fellow officers standing by "were horrified." When he finished General Pershing remained calm. He walked away, saying, "You must appreciate the troubles we have."

Marshall, aware that he had "gotten into it up to my neck," gave no quarter. "Yes, General," he replied, "but we have them every day and they have to be solved before night."

Then General Pershing was gone and tempers cooled. General Sibert was sorry that Marshall had got into such hot water for his sake. Some of Marshall's friends were sure he was finished and "would be fired right off." Marshall himself had no regrets. To those who tendered sympathy he said, "All I can see is that I might get field duty instead of staff duty, and certainly that would be a great success."

No retribution came. On the contrary, thereafter when Pershing visited the division he would often take Marshall aside to ask him how things were going. In the months following, it was clear that the general's respect and liking grew. Pershing—Marshall was to discover—was always willing to listen to honest criticism and to an extraordinary degree was able to detach himself from it. "You could talk to him as if you were discussing somebody in the next country. He never [held] it against you for an instant. I never saw another commander I could do that with. . . . It was one of his great strengths that he could listen to things." [20]

The truth was that they were something alike, at least in their professional approach—the man who commanded American troops in World War I and the man who was to direct the American Army in World War II. Pershing at West Point, like Marshall at VMI, had been a mediocre scholar but had throughout his four years held the top cadet rank in each class. He was, like Marshall, aloof, and for the same reason, holding himself apart from intimacy with those he wished to command. Like Marshall, too, Per-

shing had an unusual aptitude and fondness for teaching. He had taught elementary school for two years before going to the Military Academy. In the Army he had been an outstanding success as professor of military science and tactics at the University of Nebraska, where he took a law degree in his spare time, and as an instructor at West Point. Born too soon to have attended the new Leavenworth, although he had attended the War College, he had been a member of the first War Department General Staff and shared the professional interest of the new Army. Personally they were quite different. In many ways Pershing was the typical cavalryman, hard fighting, hard living. He had commanded troops in Cuba, where he won the Silver Star for gallantry, and in the Philippines.[21] If perhaps he was no more fond of riding and good hunting than Marshall, he had had greater opportunities to indulge them. He was a more dashing figure, popular with women, capable of self-dramatization, a skilled diplomat despite the tough and distant mien he usually assumed.

For the 1st Division the end of preliminary training came with a final review before Marshal Joffre on October 14. The next day they were attached to the 18th (French) Division for experience in the line. One battalion from each regiment was to go into the trenches at ten-day intervals and on relief would return to Gondrecourt to practice with the reality fresh in mind.[22]

It was going to war but no one expected it to be in earnest yet. The sector north and west of Nancy, which General Edouard de Castlenau had held against the Germans in the fall of 1914 with such success that he remained one of the two French high commanders still in command in 1917, had been quiet ever since. Peasants in the area went about their business within range of German guns. Through field glasses one could see the Germans in fine weather sitting outside their trenches. It was of more concern to the men of the 1st Division that on the evening of October 21, when the first of them went into the trenches, the weather was anything but fine. The men in summer uniforms were made more uncomfortable by a cold, driving rain. Winter clothing, requisitioned in July, had not arrived. The Quartermaster General's office in Washington had reported, with notable lack of tact, if nothing worse, that some items asked for could not be sent because they were needed for troops in the United States.

Two weeks later the quiet sector erupted and the Americans had their first touch of battle. It happened to the 2d Battalion of the 16th Infantry, which at ten o'clock on the evening of November 2 relieved French units near Bathelémont "along the rim of the bald hill that jutted out toward the Rhine-Marne Canal." The night was black and quiet except for an occasional crack of a rifle. Then just before three in the morning, German shells ranged in on the American position and for almost an hour bombarded the line. As the Americans ducked into their trenches and dugouts, German infantry advanced and exploded bangalore torpedoes under the barbed wire in front of the trenches. A gap about sixty yards wide was blasted and marked with white tape. The enemy —forty to fifty—waited for the signal lifting the bombardment and then rushed in from two sides. Three soldiers of Company F were killed; one had his throat cut, one was shot by a revolver, the third had his head smashed. Twelve Americans were taken prisoner as the raiders retired.[23]

The news came into the headquarters of General Paul Emile Joseph Bordeaux, commanding the 18th Division, within an hour. Marshall was there. With the general and his billet-mate, liaison officer Captain Hugo, he went up at once to the line. From the top of the communication trench leading into the deeper front-line trench he could look out over the half-mile-wide No Man's Land and see clearly marked the gap in the wire through which the Germans had attacked and withdrawn. In the main dugout he found blood, and, in the open, bodies of the three dead. At the dressing station in the rear where he and the general went to question the lightly wounded there was a moment of hot temper. Finding that General Bordeaux by his questions was implying doubt as to the courage and ability with which Americans had defended themselves, Marshall demanded to know why they had been forbidden to send patrols beyond the wire. He warned that General Pershing would be very much interested in the questioning. Bordeaux got "stiff" under the attack, and Marshall left him to visit by himself the more seriously wounded in the front-line hospital.[24]

Next day came handsome amends. To the funeral of the three Americans in Bathelémont the French sent a battalion of infantry, a troop of cavalry, dismounted, and miscellaneous troops to

represent every unit in the French Corps and do the Americans full military honor. General Bordeaux himself made an eloquent speech, which so impressed Marshall that he asked the general to dictate it to Captain Hugo. These words he found undimmed some thirty years later when, as chairman of the American Battle Monuments Commission, he offered them for an inscription on a more imposing memorial to be erected to these first Americans killed in France.

"We will therefore ask," General Bordeaux said, concluding his tribute, "that the mortal remains of these young men be left here, be left to us forever. We will inscribe on their tombs: 'Here lie the first soldiers of the famous United States Republic to fall on the soil of France, for justice and liberty.' The passer-by will stop and uncover his head. The travelers of France, of the Allied countries, of America, the men of heart, who will come to visit our battlefield of Lorraine, will go out of the way to come here, to bring to their graves the tribute of their respect and of their gratefulness. Corporal Gresham, Private Enright, Private Hay, in the name of France, I thank you. God receive your souls. Farewell!" [25] There was little enough of *la gloire* left in the trenches of the Western Front, but it endured in eloquence.