

The Things That Count

A Personal Page by Frederick Palmer

I HAVE commanded my country's army in a victorious war," said General Pershing when I mentioned to him the talk about him for the Presidency as our troops were marching into Germany. "That is enough."

He was trained to be a soldier by his country. He had done his job as a soldier under his country's orders. Another kind of job was not for him.

Twenty years hence—and let us hope that he will still be living and vigorous at eighty-three—when his gray hair and square chin rise above a crowd I think that the cheers will be even heartier than to-day.

Then time will have given the enterprise of the A. E. F. in France something of the majestic proportions which will be accorded to it by history.

He was the organizer and the moulder of the A. E. F. The stamp of his character was upon it in so far as any one man can put his stamp upon a vast modern army. At the same time the stamp of the Americanism of all who served under him was upon him. It was this combination which made the A. E. F. so strictly American. As an American it was his duty to get the best out of the spirit of America in war.

To the soldier of the A. E. F. he was remote, a man of iron, imposing an iron discipline upon the army. All regulations and all exactions took his name in the words "by command."

Washington, who never had as many as 20,000 men in battle, was closer to his men than the average division commander in France. Grant was a familiar figure to the advancing columns on narrow fronts in his day. Pershing's soldiers could not see and know the commander of an army of two million scattered over France fighting on other widely separated fronts as well as on the long front of the Meuse-Argonne.

Pershing must direct all; he must be responsible for all. He must act through subordinates who had been jumped from civil life into war or who commanded thousands in war when they had not been commanding hundreds in peace.

If failure came, however, it was Pershing's failure. His was the name for a system. By the destiny of army authority his was the personality in the limelight whether in victory or defeat. The A. E. F. won. America won. He won.

He was the only general we ever had, except Washington, who began and finished a war in command. The A. E. F. kept on winning all the time from the start. All historians of the A. E. F. as a whole or of any part of it, from base ports to trenches, will please keep this in mind. It is the big fact, the unforgettable and now unchangeable fact. This in spite of our unpreparedness, and we may not have such good luck next time if we are unprepared.

TO anyone who knew, in the days when he was unknown, a man who has become a great figure, that man is always the human being. You think of him in his qualities as a man among men with his strong points and his weaknesses. I happen to have known Pershing when he was a captain, and I mention this so that the reader will get my angle of view.

Young John Pershing was at the plough when he received word that he had been appointed to West Point and would become an officer of the regular army. I am sure that he was ploughing a deep straight furrow. That's the kind of man he is.

"I've got this job to do," he would say, and it was hard to draw him away on anything else whether play or an inspection until he had that job off his mind. And he had to do that job thoroughly, no matter how late he had to sit up over it.

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As a companion on the march or in play he was right in the game with all his heart. He never let down in discouragement, least of all when he got mad. Most men who are good fighters can get mad on occasion.

There was nobody from whom Captain Pershing would not learn. He was always on the lookout for more information. He had a growing mind, when the trouble with lots of men we know, including some of the subordinates who enforced his regulations, is that they stop growing mentally at the same time that they stop growing physically.

At fifty-six, when Pershing took command of the A. E. F., he was still able to grow. The bigger the task the more capacity he had for rising to it. He struck his furrow deep and straight from the start in France, and the more roots and boulders he encountered the stiffer he held the plough handles.

GOING to France with a little band of pioneers, an unprepared country behind him, the submarine menace at its height in a crisis of the Allied fortunes, he never once let down from that day to the end. He faced realities. He met the realities with vision. When the people at home, kept from the truth lest the Germans be encouraged, were thinking in terms of thousands he planned for an army of a million men overseas.

Probably another General would supersede him, as had happened in other wars, but that was not his worry. His duty was to lay such a good foundation that his successor would thank him for it. They might break him but on the day that he yielded the reins he would be found at the plough and not making speeches or playing to the gallery.

Europe thought that we would send over a mob of untrained men to fight beside her veterans. Pershing was to give Europe a surprise. He meant to have an army worthy of American manhood. The very fact of our unpreparedness and want of trained officers required an iron discipline from the top. So we had it, sometimes misinterpreted, but its purpose was clear to Pershing, irritating as it often was. But he also imposed iron discipline upon himself as he kept at the plough sixteen hours a day.

In European armies officers mostly come from the officer class to which they are born. America sent as her commander the man from the plough. In all his dealings with the allied statesmen and generals he remained John Pershing, plougher—also from Missouri—and it was his directness and simplicity which, through a sea of difficulties, kept our army intact as an army, and fought it as an army at St. Mihiel and in the Meuse-Argonne instead of having its identity lost and perhaps the war lost by mixing it as battalions among the allied armies.

He was not only a soldier but an ambassador at the head of the greatest embassy we ever sent to Europe. When our veterans marched into Germany and our mixed regiment marched in the victory parades in Paris and London we had shown Europe that although we do not want war we know how to make war if war comes.

There were mistakes in the A. E. F. There always are in war. Mistakes are human. "Why did you march that corps to the left and then back to the right without engaging it?" a German general asked Grant. "A blunder," replied Grant. Grouchy as we got, sometimes, with that "by command of General Pershing," we did win that war, and he was our leader. As I know John Pershing he is all man and soldier. May he live to be an hundred!