

Chapter One

BACKGROUND TO THE MEUSE-ARGONNE

Edward G. Lengel with James Lacey

November 1917 found the nations aligned against the Central Powers in a difficult situation. Continuing political turmoil brought the Russian government to its knees, allowing Germany to release dozens of divisions for service on the Western Front. Seven of them assisted the Austrians in launching a successful offensive against the Italians at Caporetto in October. The Italian army fell back over 95 kilometers and nearly collapsed. Meanwhile, a bloody and largely futile British offensive at Passchendaele that began on 31 July and lasted through November had resulted in the loss of another 200,000 men. Some wondered whether France and Britain were still capable of offensive action. Pershing's intelligence officers told him that the Germans would be able to bring up to 217 divisions into action on the Western Front by the spring of 1918. Even with the anticipated arrival of several large (compared to their European equivalents) American divisions, the Germans would enjoy a superiority of about 46 divisions (Lacey 2008, 129–30).

Above all, the French and British needed manpower to replenish their depleted units. Although the United States had declared war on Germany in April 1917, by the autumn only 175,000 doughboys had arrived in Europe and few of them had seen action of any sort (Smythe 1986, 69). The amalgamation of American soldiers into Allied units as individual replacements thus seemed a reasonable idea to the hard-pressed Entente powers. They already possessed the division and corps staffs that the Americans lacked and would take many months to build. Amalgamation would also ease the shipping problem, allowing the Americans to concentrate on transporting men to Europe without worrying about organizational

details, equipment, or supplies. Incorporated into European formations, American soldiers could gain combat experience right away, pending the formation of an independent American army at some unspecified future date.

Pershing rejected amalgamation outright. His argument for the formation of a separate American army rested in part on national pride. But he also predicted compatibility issues, such as language difficulties for men serving with the French, and the possible refusal of soldiers of Irish and German descent to serve under British command. Another consideration, albeit unstated, was the probability that amalgamation would weaken the American position in postwar peace negotiations. President Wilson and Secretary of War Newton D. Baker had instructed Pershing to resist amalgamation partly upon this basis.

Past experience did not recommend the benefits of French and British leadership, for all their protests about the lessons they had learned. Since 1914, they had lost millions of men dead and wounded in one bloody campaign after another, often for trifling gains. French marshal Joseph Joffre was reputed to have remarked that it took about 15,000 casualties to train a major general; and British prime minister Lloyd George allegedly hoarded soldiers in the safety of the English countryside, away from the grasping fingers of his bloody-minded general, Douglas Haig (Lacey 2008, 131). Pershing likely imagined with horror the outcry that would have resulted if thousands of American soldiers died as cannon fodder in further pointless offensives under foreign command. He did not entertain the possibility that French and British military leaders might indeed have learned the lessons of past mistakes, and thus have been more cautious about incurring useless casualties than their American counterparts.

Pershing's continued resistance to amalgamation brought him under heavy pressure from the French and British. Marshal Philippe Pétain told Colonel Edward House, Wilson's presidential advisor, that Pershing's intransigence made him unsuitable for command of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), and requested his replacement. European officers, diplomats, and politicians traveled to Washington with the same message, evidently unaware that Wilson and his secretary of war had dictated the anti-amalgamation policy to Pershing in the first place. Nevertheless, in a show of good intentions Baker directed General Tasker Bliss, the army chief of staff and American member of the Supreme War Council, to look into the matter. Bliss listened patiently to the British and French, and sensed their growing desperation. From London, he reported to Baker that "they all seem very rattled over here. . . . They want men and they want them badly. . . . If we do not make the greatest sacrifices now and, as a result, a great disaster should come, we will never forgive ourselves, nor will the world forgive us" (Lacey 2008, 131).

Bliss's growing responsiveness to European demands left Pershing singularly unimpressed. He wondered aloud why the British were allegedly hoarding men in England and sending thousands more soldiers to the Middle East and Africa instead of sending them to the Western Front. Pershing rejected a British proposal to ship 150 American battalions to France as replacements, proposing instead to fill the ships with six full American divisions that would fight under American command (Smythe 1986, 70). Bearding Bliss in his den at the Supreme War Council, Pershing barked that there would be no amalgamation, and that was that. When Bliss suggested that they refer the final decision to Washington, Pershing shot back: "Well, Bliss, do you know what would happen should we do that? We would both be relieved of further duty in France and that is exactly what we should deserve" (Smythe 1986, 77). Bliss relented and promised to stand alongside Pershing in resisting amalgamation. At a meeting of the council the following morning Bliss solemnly announced that "Pershing will speak for both of us and whatever he says with regard to the disposition of American troops will have my approval" (Pershing 1931, 2:305). Facing a newly determined American duo, the British submitted to Pershing's proposal to ship six American divisions to Europe, but insisted that the Yanks begin their training behind British lines. Clearly the struggle over amalgamation had not yet ended.

The long-anticipated German offensive made possible by the collapse of Russia took place on 21 March 1918. Twenty-six under-strength British divisions holding positions near the Somme fell back before an onslaught of 71 German divisions following a massive artillery barrage. German *Stoßtruppen*, or storm troops practicing innovative infiltration tactics, opened a gap 65 kilometers wide in the British lines. The overwhelming initial success of the German offensive, codenamed Operation Michael, caused widespread consternation among British and French leaders. As German penetrations expanded in April, something like panic developed. Pétain took steps to cover Paris even if it meant cutting links with the retreating British, while Haig told his troops that their backs were to the wall. "Every position must be held to the last man," he declared; "there must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall, and believing in the justice of our cause, each one of us must fight on to the end. The safety of our homes and the freedom of mankind alike depend upon the conduct of each of us at this critical moment" (Stephenson 2011, 72–73). Some British officers nevertheless spoke of pulling back to the Channel ports for possible evacuation to England. Although the Germans were stopped just short of Amiens, the British Fifth Army had suffered 164,000 casualties and lost 90,000 prisoners, along with 200 tanks, 1,000 guns, and 4,000 machine guns (Lacey 2008, 133).

Such brutal losses of men and territory spurred further talk of amalgamation, and even Pershing had to admit the need for compromise. Secretary

Baker, visiting London, secured Pershing's agreement to focus on rushing essentially unequipped American infantry and machine-gun battalions to Europe. However, the six divisions that had been promised earlier would still be sent as intact units, and American ships would continue to transport support troops and equipment at their own pace, with the goal of eventually building a separate American army. The compromise only partially reduced tensions. At another meeting of the Supreme War Council in May, Foch demanded to know whether Pershing would be "willing to risk our being driven back to the Loire?" "Yes," Pershing responded, to Foch's dismay, "I am willing to take the risk. Moreover, the time may come when the American army will have to stand the brunt of this war, and it is not wise to fritter away our resources in this manner." The stubborn American thereupon pounded his fist on the table, yelling, "Gentlemen, I have thought this program over very deliberately and will not be coerced" (Pershing 1931, 2:28–29).

At other times, and especially in public, Pershing expressed somewhat more altruistic sentiments. He responded to Foch's request for help with a declaration that "the American people would consider it a great honor for our troops to be engaged in the present battle. I ask you for this in their name and my own. At the moment there is no other question but of fighting. Infantry, artillery, aviation, all that we have is yours: use them as you wish. More will come, in numbers equal to the requirements" (Harbord 1936, 244). In truth, however, he could deliver very little. The most effective and well-organized American division in France was General Robert Lee Bullard's 1st Infantry Division, which moved into the line in May to support the French near Cantigny. By then, however, the need for American support no longer loomed so critical. Although the Germans continued their offensives at different points of the front, they were clearly losing momentum.

Pershing nevertheless saw the appearance of the 1st Division at the front as an opportunity to deliver a blow against Germany – for propaganda purposes if nothing else. Although the village of Cantigny possessed no particular military value for either side, it could gain fame as the first settlement liberated by the Americans – if the 1st Division could take it. Bullard promised that he could, and Pershing ordered the necessary orders to be drawn up. As the attack commenced on 28 May, Pershing nervously paced back and forth at 1st Division headquarters. Turning to Bullard, he released some of his pent-up exasperation from the amalgamation controversy of the past few months: "Do [the French] patronize you? Do they assume superior airs with you?" he demanded. Bullard quietly responded "They do not. . . . I know them too well." "By God!" Pershing burst out, "They have been trying it with me, and I don't intend to stand for it" (Eisenhower 2001, 129). Meanwhile the attack went in, and succeeded.

While the 1st Division beat off German counterattacks around Cantigny and American journalists publicized the triumph, the French in the Chemin

des Dames sector to the south attempted to weather a sudden crisis. On 27 May, Ludendorff launched a new offensive that caught the French completely by surprise and shattered a 50-kilometer sector of the front. German troops penetrated 50 kilometers and caused 100,000 French casualties, with an additional 60,000 captured (Lacey 2008, 139). Pershing met with a gloomy Foch, recently appointed Allied Supreme Commander, on 30 May, and was subjected to another verbal barrage on amalgamation. Pershing bristled at Foch's apparent loss of nerve, and self-consciously agreed to send American forces to the rescue of their supposedly beaten compatriots – on condition that they fight as intact units. Facing an immediate crisis, the French submitted to the conditions. For the first time, American units would see action on a large scale.

Pershing sent his 2d and 3d Divisions toward the lines while the 1st Division expanded its sector at Cantigny so that the French could send more reinforcements to stem the German advance. Trucks driven by natives of French Indochina hauled thousands of Yanks by way of Paris toward the front, but the infantry had to march the last stages on foot. Doughboys and Marines had never seen retreat on a large scale before, and as they approached the combat zone they imagined that the entire French army had disintegrated. French peasants and disgruntled *poilus* cynically regaled the green doughboys with cries of “la guerre est finie,” reinforcing the impression that only a couple of American divisions stood between the Germans and Paris. American officers told their men that the fate of France depended entirely on them. Closer to the front, French units continued to resist the Germans heroically, but without attracting any notice from their cocksure American compatriots.

Major General Omar Bundy commanded the 2d Division, and Pershing had selected many of its officers. It consisted of an army and a Marine brigade, the latter commanded by Pershing's former chief of staff, army Brigadier General James Harbord. Although the division was well trained and had experienced something of trench warfare in quiet sectors, it remained an unknown quantity. Potentially the meshing of army and Marine units might create serious problems. Moreover, Pershing had doubts about Bundy's strength of character and ability to command effectively under the stresses of combat. He therefore appointed Colonel Preston Brown to serve as Bundy's chief of staff. A ruthless, no-nonsense officer who had been accused of illegally executing Philippine insurgents a decade earlier, Brown served effectively as Bundy's backup and support.

General Jean Degoutte, commanding the French XXI Corps near Château-Thierry, proposed to commit the 2d Division's regiments to the battle as they arrived. Brown, taking this as a transgression against French promises that American divisions would fight as intact units, raised a ruckus. Instead, he proposed to deploy the division behind the French and hold the line as they pulled back. Degoutte consented and asked the Americans to

establish lines facing east toward Château-Thierry. He then turned to Brown and asked, “Can the Americans really hold?” Brown complacently replied, “General, these are American regulars. In a hundred and fifty years they have never been beaten. They will hold” (Bonk 2007, 46). At least, that is how Brown remembered the exchange.

American journalists would subsequently magnify beyond all proportion the actions of the 2d and 3d Divisions in resisting the German advance. Their tales of American heroism and French cowardice – the latter bordering on the slanderous – have endured in military legend, and been echoed by some historians who claim that the Yanks single-handedly defeated the German offensive and saved Paris. Historian James Lacey, for example, derides European historians who have “tended to minimize the contributions of the Second and Third Divisions in stemming the German advance,” and asserts that “for five days not a single French unit had stood its ground and fought” until the 2d Division stepped in and saved the day (Lacey 2008, 141). In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Translated German army records indicate that Ludendorff’s thrust around Château-Thierry (which anyway did not aim toward Paris) had ground to a halt by 3–4 June – primarily in the face of tenacious *French* resistance, and before substantial numbers of Americans had come into contact (Zabecki 2012; *Translations* 1930, vol. 4).

None of which, of course, should detract from the heroism of American soldiers and Marines once they did enter the fight. On 6 June, Harbord ordered his Marine brigade to attack the Germans in Belleau Wood, where they suffered incredible slaughter – including 5,000 dead or wounded – over the following few weeks. In the process they learned some painful lessons. During the battle’s first days, the Germans were shocked as much by the weight of the American assault as by the clumsiness of their tactics. In time, however, they came to respect the gritty determination of the Americans to achieve success whatever the cost. Experience also taught army and Marine field officers the value of elementary tactical principles, and of battlefield improvisation. Recognizing the symbolic importance of the fight for Belleau Wood, the commander of the German 28th Division had told his officers that “it is not a question of the possession or nonpossession of this or that village or woods. It is a question whether the Anglo-American claim that the American army is equal or the superior of the German army is to be made good.” On 26 June, however, the triumphant cry rang out: “This Wood now exclusively U.S. Marine Corps” (Lacey 2008, 142).

The aftermath of Belleau Wood saw a convergence of sorts around Château-Thierry. By the end of June, five American divisions – the 1st, 2d, 3d, 4th, and 28th – were in close proximity in the region. Pershing seized on the opportunity thus offered by ordering General Hunter Liggett to establish the American I Corps at Château-Thierry on 21 June. By 4 July,

the corps had entered the line as a distinct entity, although elements of some divisions – particularly the untried 28th – remained intermingled with French formations. Pershing hoped that with another corps or two he could build the First American Army.

The loss of Belleau Wood emboldened the Americans but it did not faze Ludendorff, who determinedly launched further extensions to his grand offensive. These culminated on 15 July, when German artillery opened fire against French and American positions along the Marne east of Château-Thierry. Doughboys of the American 3d and 28th Divisions – the latter distributed piecemeal among French units despite Pershing's insistence to the contrary – held on alongside equally determined (for the most part) French infantrymen, known as *poilus*. As the German offensive broke down in chaos, Foch set the machinery in motion for an immediate counterblow toward Soissons. Success would sever German supply routes for their troops in the region and force a general withdrawal. Encouraged by the confident Pershing, the French commander allocated the American 1st and 2d Divisions – the latter still reeling from its horrific experiences in Belleau Wood – to the attack.

The counteroffensive was a rush job, and allowed little time for proper preparation. The Americans hurried pell-mell toward the front. Moving up through pouring rain and intense darkness during the night of 17–18 July, some infantry became hopelessly lost while others literally jogged, exhausted, into their jump-off positions just as the whistles blew calling the advance. Many artillery, machine-gun, and other support units became caught up in one of the greatest traffic jams in history – until 26 September, the first day of the Meuse-Argonne – and did not arrive at the front until the attack was well underway. Reconnaissance was nonexistent, and French officers and guides provided little aid. The attack went in regardless, with the 1st Division, now commanded by Major General Charles Summerall, on the left; the French 1st Moroccan Division in the center; and the 2d Division, now commanded by General Harbord, on the right.

The suddenness of the attack caught the Germans by surprise, and resistance collapsed in some places. Reserves were slow in coming up, and some German officers despaired of holding Soissons. Fortunately for them, the 2d Division collapsed in total exhaustion after a day's heavy fighting, while units of the 1st Division became hopelessly entangled with the Moroccans and each other. Although the advance reached 5 kilometers on the first day, it slowed down drastically thereafter in the face of disorganization and stiffening German resistance. German reinforcements – increasingly ravaged by influenza, like many units along the line – nevertheless fought bitterly. Summerall's 1st Division remained in the line for three days after the 2d Division withdrew, and he became increasingly frustrated at the slow pace of the advance. When a French staff officer asked Summerall whether his men could continue the fight, he testily replied, "Sir, when the 1st Division

has only two men left, they will be echeloned in depth and attacking towards Berlin.” To a battalion commander who complained that the enemy had stopped his advance, the general angrily blustered, “you may have paused for reorganization, but if you ever send me a message with the word stopped in it again you will be relieved of command” (Smythe 1986, 57).

The slowness of the Franco-American advance gave the Germans enough respite to conduct a planned, orderly withdrawal from the salient. Nevertheless, to the Americans the results smelled a lot like victory despite the loss of 7,000 soldiers from the 1st Division alone, including three-quarters of its field grade officers (Stewart 2005, 2:38). The failure of the 15 July offensive and further setbacks against the British left the Germans definitely on the defensive by August. Since 21 March they had lost over a million men, while Yanks continued to debark by the tens of thousands at French ports. German chancellor Georg von Hertling later said: “We expected great events in Paris for the end of July. That was on the 15th. On the 18th even the most optimistic among us understood that all was lost. The history of the world was played out in three days” (Strachan 2003, 298). The initiative had passed permanently to the British, French – and Americans, if they could find a way to take advantage of it.

Whatever the American battlefield contribution, the Yanks continued to provide an incalculable boost to French and British civilian and military morale. British nurse Vera Brittain reflected, as she saw American soldiers for the first time, that “they looked like Tommies in heaven. I pressed forward to watch the United States physically entering the War, so god-like, so magnificent, so splendidly unimpaired in comparison with the tired, nerve-racked men of the British Army” (Strachan 2003, 311). The numbers alone were enough to lift the spirits of even the most war-weary observers. By midsummer Pershing had 1.2 million American soldiers and Marines in Europe, bringing them close to total British and French strength on the Western Front.

Whether the Americans were yet ready to fight on a large scale was another matter. The events at Belleau Wood and Soissons had convinced the French and British of American bravery, but not of American preparedness. Stubbornly unwilling to take friendly advice, the Yanks had often marched into battle with parade-ground tactics that ensured appalling casualties. Without question, the American divisions packed a lethal punch – but they had not shown the ability to endure for the long term on the battlefield despite their large size. After their epic struggle at Belleau Wood, the Marines of the 2d Division had been willing but physically unable to endure for long the privations of combat around Soissons. The 1st Division, despite its long training and success at Cantigny, had broken down in confusion at Soissons despite some early successes. Similar problems emerged as various American divisions contributed to the Aisne-Marne offensive in August. To European observers, the Americans fought like lions – when

they could avoid tripping over their own feet. Foch and his generals imagined such mistakes being replicated on a large scale and could not help but shudder. They were not yet reconciled to the formation of an independent American army.

Pershing, however, had seen enough. True, there had been some confusion and disorganization among American units at the front, but he put this down – with good reason – to insufficient training and the absence of adequate support resulting from the “infantry first” policy in shipping the AEF overseas. So far as he was concerned, the time had come for the formation of First Army. Brushing aside further talk of amalgamation, he issued orders on 14 July for its creation, effective 10 August. In pondering the section of the front that the new army would occupy, Pershing at first thought of sticking to the Marne salient with which the troops were already familiar. On further consideration, however, better opportunities to test First Army’s mettle seemed to beckon elsewhere. Buttonholing Pétain and demanding his support, Pershing confronted Foch with the idea of launching an American offensive to eliminate the German salient at St. Mihiel. Although the salient had grown quiescent in recent years, it dated from 1914 and still constituted a thorn in the side of French defenses on the Western Front. With luck, the Americans might even be able to continue their offensive toward Metz and drive toward – or even across – the German border.

With Foch’s apparent consent, Pershing happily set to work deploying troops and preparing for the attack. He officially took command on 30 August, and invited Foch to visit his headquarters on the same day. If Pershing expected praise and vindication from his wily French adversary, however, he had another thing coming. Striding into headquarters, Foch breezily declared his intention of modifying the plan to reduce the St. Mihiel salient. German-held territory on the Western Front, he pointed out, now constituted a single large salient. The way to reduce that salient was not to hit it here and there like a toy balloon, but to squeeze it relentlessly in concentric attacks until it burst. To make that happen, he proposed to have the British continue their attacks on the Somme while the French and Americans (with the latter of course in a junior role) pressed the Germans toward Mézières. This change of plans would of course reduce the scope of, or entirely put an end to, the planned offensive against St. Mihiel.

Foch proposed that Pershing leave nine divisions to contain the St. Mihiel salient, and remove the remainder of the American First Army northwest to the Champagne and Argonne Forest sectors. There they would perform a subsidiary role in a large French offensive against the southwest portion of the German Western Front salient, attacking in two separate areas with a French army in between. Operationally, French Fourth Army would take control over the Americans. Mindful of the alleged American mismanagement of operations at Belleau Wood, Soissons, and the Aisne-Marne, Foch

further suggested that French generals should accompany American divisions and corps – implicitly so that they could provide assistance and advice to the well-intentioned but inept Yank officers. “I realize I am presenting you with a number of new ideas and you probably need time to think them over,” the Frenchman glibly concluded, “but I should like your impressions” (Pershing 1931, 2:244).

Pershing’s response could not have surprised Foch, who had spent enough time arguing with his American counterpart to realize that he did not back down easily. “Marshal Foch,” Pershing responded furiously, “here on the very day that you turn over a sector to the American army and almost on the eve of an offensive, you ask me to reduce the operation so that you can take away several of my divisions and assign some of them to the French Second Army and use others to form an American army to operate on the Aisne in conjunction with the French Fourth Army, leaving me with little to do except hold a quiet sector. . . . This virtually destroys the American Army that we have been trying so long to form” (Pershing 1931, 2:244). He went on to point out that the abrupt reconfiguration would create a logistical nightmare for the Americans, possibly leaving them incapable of operations for weeks. Besides, the St. Mihiel salient threatened the flank of any advance in the Champagne and Meuse-Argonne, and should be eliminated as a preliminary to Foch’s concentric attacks. Brushing Pershing’s objections aside – no doubt with a Gallic shrug – Foch offered his regrets but said he saw no alternative to his plan. A showdown thereupon commenced.

After further discussion, Pershing returned to the idea of giving First Army an independent sector of operations on the Western Front. Seriously annoyed by now, Foch rejected Pershing’s sally and asked with barely concealed contempt, “Do you wish to take part in the battle?” Pershing, his own dander thoroughly aroused, responded: “Most assuredly, but as an American Army and in no other way.” “There is no time to send an entire Army,” Foch snapped. Pershing replied, “Give me a sector and I will occupy it immediately . . . wherever you say.” The argument continued. Foch spoke of the lack of American artillery and support formations, and Pershing angrily countered that in that case the French and British had only themselves to blame. It was they, after all, who had insisted that the United States focus on sending only infantry overseas to combat the German spring and summer offensives. It was Foch’s responsibility, not Pershing’s, to make up the shortfall in guns and support formations (Pershing 1931, 2:246).

Frustrated at the growing impasse, Foch opted to escalate. “Your French and English comrades are going into battle,” he sneered; “are you coming with them?” He might as well have dropped a live hand grenade on the table. “Marshal Foch,” Pershing growled, “you have no authority as Allied commander-in-chief to call upon me to yield up my command of the American Army and have it scattered among the Allied forces where it will

not be an American Army at all.” “I must insist upon that arrangement,” Foch snapped. A thoroughly fed up Pershing shouted, “Marshal Foch you may insist all you please, but I decline absolutely to agree to your plan. While our army will fight wherever you may decide, it will not fight except as an independent American army!” The two generals thereupon simultaneously leapt up from the table as their interpreters looked on aghast. For a moment it appeared as if the two would start throwing furniture – and indeed Pershing briefly considered socking Foch in the jaw – but fortunately the Frenchman backed down. Leaving a memorandum of his proposal on the table, Foch withdrew after making a final face-saving remark. “Once you have thought more about it,” he told a still livid Pershing, “I am sure you will consent” (Pershing 1931, 2:247). Foch, no mean judge of character, could not really have expected the American to reconsider. Writing that evening in his diary, Pershing griped: “Firmly convinced that it is the fixed purpose of the French, and perhaps the British, that the formation of an American Army should be prevented if possible. Perhaps they do not want America to find out her strength” (Smythe 1986, 175–176; Vandiver 1977, 2:937–939).

A night’s rest calmed tempers without abating Pershing’s determination. On 31 August, he formally rejected Foch’s proposal in writing and then sought out Pétain, who had often proved a sympathetic ally. Pétain agreed to help mediate a compromise. He accompanied Pershing to another meeting with Foch on 2 September, where the American proposed to abandon St. Mihiel and transfer the entire First Army to the Meuse-Argonne region. There First Army could take part as an independent player in Foch’s series of concentric attacks. Balking at the delays this would entail, Foch countered that if the Americans really felt ready to act as equal participants in the combination, they might as well take on not one, but two offensives. First, they could attack and eliminate the St. Mihiel salient, but without proceeding toward Metz. After the conclusion of this attack, the Americans would then need to transfer their effort to the Meuse-Argonne in time to meet Foch’s timetable for the grand series of offensives against Germany. In the Meuse-Argonne, Pershing could have his independent front, with French armies acting on either flank in support – but he would need to move quickly. If Foch designed his proposal to appeal to American pride, he calculated it effectively. Pershing quickly agreed, on the understanding that the Meuse-Argonne offensive would take place no sooner than 25 September. The meeting concluded with Franco-American comity restored, at least for the moment.

Pershing’s decision to accept Foch’s ambitious proposal posed a daunting task for First Army. The success with which it carried out the program must stand as one of the AEF’s greatest accomplishments. Over half a million American and 110,000 French troops attacked the St. Mihiel salient in the early morning hours of 12 September, backed by thousands of artillery

pieces along with tanks and planes. The attack went well. The Germans had already begun withdrawing from the salient, but the American assault caught them off guard and forced many formations to disintegrate. Logistical difficulties continued to plague First Army, resulting in traffic jams and supply shortages. Once again, as during the summer, communications and liaison were poor. Infantry units intermingled during the advance, and often worked at cross-purposes with the artillery. On the whole, though, the troops – even in the inexperienced green formations – performed surprisingly well. Colonel Billy Mitchell’s airmen generally delivered on their promise to secure air superiority, and American officers learned more valuable lessons on infantry tactics and the employment of tanks. In four days, First Army cleared the entire salient and captured 15,000 Germans and hundreds of guns at the cost of only 9,000 casualties of their own (Lengel 2008, 52).

St. Mihiel provided a huge morale boost for the men of First Army, and vindication for Pershing. For the first time, an American army had conducted a campaign under its own officers – and succeeded. True, lessons remained to be learned; but the Americans thought they had progressed far enough to learn them on their own rather than seeking advice, cap in hand, from the French and British. The rapid reduction of a salient that had resisted attack for four years also seemed to vindicate Pershing’s faith in the doctrine of open warfare. He had promoted this with a determination equal to that with which he had resisted amalgamation. A general had only to place determined American troops in any sector, under American command, and they would quickly transform a trench-warfare stalemate into the long-sought war of movement.

The quick German collapse in the St. Mihiel salient, however much it owed to American proficiency, would nevertheless prove deceptive. The Meuse-Argonne was an entirely different type of battlefield, defended by determined troops who had every intention of holding their ground. Just getting there would be a challenge. As the St. Mihiel offensive drew to a close on 15–16 September, Pershing and his staff – notably Colonel George C. Marshall – had to immediately implement plans for shifting the entire focus of the American effort to the Meuse-Argonne, all within a mere ten days. The brilliance with which men like Marshall carried out this task could only partially atone for the difficulties the move would impose on the troops who would carry out the attack. Because of earlier deployments and Foch’s timetable, Pershing’s best and most experienced divisions launched the main attack at St. Mihiel while green units remained in reserve. These reserve divisions were the easiest to transfer to the front lines in the Meuse-Argonne, and would therefore bear the brunt of the initial attack in that region – all this despite the fact that the Meuse-Argonne offensive was of much greater strategic importance than the one that preceded it. The inexperienced officers and troops who attacked in the Meuse-Argonne on

26 September had their work cut out for them. Their courage would stand as a shining example for the entire AEF; but their mistakes would ultimately ruin the offensive's overall timetable, giving the Germans time to bring up reserves and needlessly costing the lives of thousands of doughboys before the war ended.

Pershing nevertheless already had won an important victory before the first American gun opened fire in the Meuse-Argonne. The fight for the formation of an independent American army had been constant and grueling. It had demanded every ounce of his strength and determination. Fortunately, Pershing possessed an abundance of grit. Confronted by seasoned and sly adversaries such as Foch and Haig, he had compromised where necessary but refused to abandon his prime directive. The formation of American divisions, corps, and finally armies created some hardships that the doughboys and Marines might have avoided through amalgamation; but it also provided them with opportunities to learn difficult lessons on their own rather than as junior apprentices. The fight against amalgamation was not all about pride or earning an equal seat at the postwar peace table; ultimately, it determined whether or not the American armed forces would enter the twentieth century. They did so among the fields, crags, and forests of the Meuse-Argonne.

NOTE

Edward G. Lengel adapted portions of this essay from chapter 10 of James Lacey's *Pershing* (2008). Lacey submitted that chapter as his contribution for this work, and subsequently gave permission for its adaptation.

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