



The ASC History Newsletter

100th Anniversary of World War I:

The AEF's Early Challenges with Coalition Warfare

This
MONTH in
military
history ...

1775: American Revolution began

1776: Congress authorized privateers to attack British shipping

1813: Toronto captured by Americans

1818: Gen. Jackson seized St. Marks, FL from Seminole Indians

1832: Black Hawk war began

1836: Battle of San Jacinto

1846: Battle of Cerro Gordo

1861: Civil War began with attack on Fort Sumter

1865: Battle of Five Forks

1899: Spain ceded Puerto Rico, Philippines and Guam to US

1917: Declaration of War

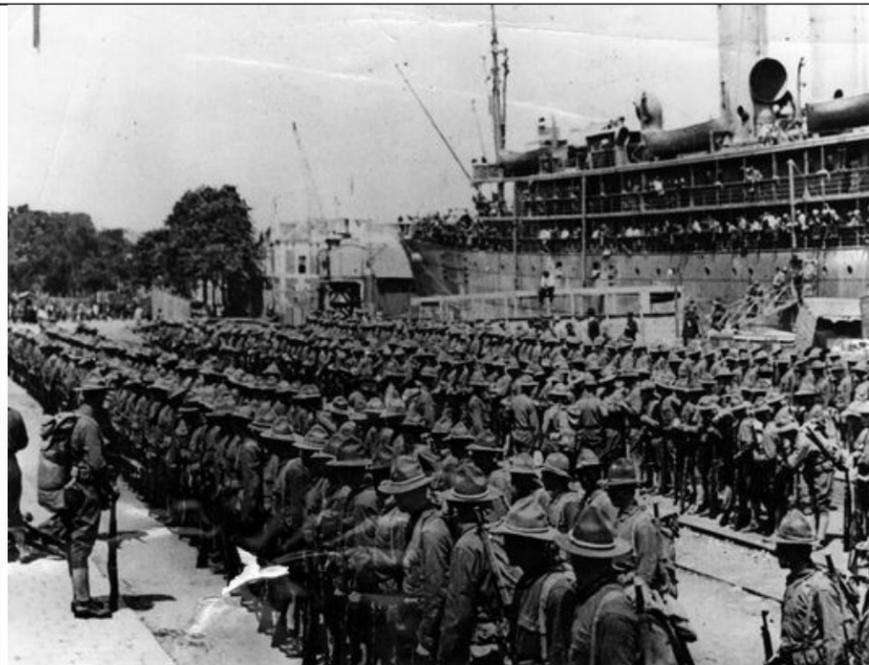
1918: Red Baron shot down

1918: Ferdinand Foch became Allied Supreme Commander

1945: US troops landed on Okinawa

1945: Japanese Battleship Yamato sunk

1949: NATO formed



Major General John J. Pershing assumed his duties as Commander-in-Chief of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) on May 26, 1917. Before departing for France, Secretary of War Baker gave "Blackjack" these instructions. "In military operations against the Imperial German Government you are dictated to cooperate with the forces of the other countries employed against the enemy; but in so doing the underlying idea must be kept in view that the forces of the United States are a separate and distinct component of the combined forces, the identity of which must be preserved. This fundamental rule is subject to such minor exceptions in particular circumstances as your judgment may approve. The decision as to when your command or any of its parts is ready for action is confided to you, and you will exercise full discretion in determining the manner of cooperation. But until the forces of the United States are, in your judgment, sufficiently strong to warrant operations as an independent command, it is understood that you will cooperate as a component of whatever army you may be assigned to by the French Government".

However, before General Pershing could contemplate independent actions on the Western Front with the AEF, there were quite a few factors that needed to be addressed:

1. Lack of fully organized American divisions, corps, or armies, when the United States entered the war.
2. The desire of the French and British to use Americans as individuals, companies, battalions, or regiments, in their units and under French and British commanders, to replace losses and to maintain their depleted combat divisions at full strength in 1918, as

the quickest way to make American help effective.

3. American desires to transform the AEF into one or more American armies, with appropriate corps, army, and supply troops, to operate under American commanders, side by side with the French and British armies.
4. Necessity for procuring much vital equipment, such as artillery, tanks, and aircraft in Europe.
5. Urgent necessity to complete the training of newly organized American units so as to have them ready to help repulse the German offensives expected on the Western Front in 1918.
6. Availability of certain French ports, railways, training areas, and combat zones suitable for large-scale operations by American troops.
7. Shipping that could be made available to transport American troops and supplies.

Some of these issues were dealt with soon after arriving in France, while others were never truly solved. General Pershing was able to carve out an American area to consolidate and train as they arrived. The area agreed upon was the region around Neufchateau, Nancy and Epinal. In this area, Pershing had to take a small regular American army and enlarge it to the size of the other combatants.

Initially the size of the army contemplated by the War Department was grossly inaccurate. For example, on July 6, 1917 General Pershing cabled the War Department and wrote: "Plans should contemplate sending over at least 1,000,000 men by next May...Inasmuch as question affects all Allies whose common interests demand that we exert maximum military power consistent with transport problem, suggest early agreement be reached among Allies

which would provide requisite transportation".

The issue was of paramount importance to the Americans, as they had to move an entire army across the Atlantic; however, the Allies were not as concerned, as Pershing wrote.

"The question, in its finality, was, therefore, one of sea transportation; but so far all efforts to get the Allies, especially the British, to consider giving help to bring over men and supplies had been futile. They did not seem to realize that America would be practically negligible from a military standpoint unless the Allies could provide some shipping. Nor did they seem to appreciate that time was a vital factor. But the spirit of full cooperation among the Allies did not then exist. They seemed to regard the transportation of an American army overseas as entirely our affair. This apparent indifference also gave further color to the suspicion that perhaps an American army as such was not wanted".

However, once the American army was raised to the level of its European counterparts, the matter of equipping them became more acute. Back in America, industry began to ramp up military production. In planner's minds, "Plans for the future should be based, especially in reference to the manufacture of artillery, aviation and other materials, on three times this force, i.e., at least 3,000,000 men. Such a program of construction should be completed within two years. Unfortunately, the Allies did not have that long to wait. To alleviate this problem, the American government would get much of their heavy armament from their European allies.

In next month issue, we will discuss the Battle of Catigny. This would be the American Expeditionary Force's first taste of the realities of modern industrial warfare.

