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1919, Wesley to Family

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Comments

An exact date is not known for this letter. The year listed is an estimation and may not be accurate.

Pershing at 80

(Continued from page 7)

and a far better known part of our history than the campaign of 1918. The crossing of the Meuse by the Fifth Division was in many ways a more striking and difficult operation than the battle of Chattanooga—how many Americans have ever heard of it? Not a single textbook of American history is conscious that any such thing as the attack of November 1st ever happened. In a general way, it is cheerfully agreed that there was a glorious victory—but let us not go into the details.

In the same way the bringing into being of the American Army in France has come to be rather taken for granted. In a vague way it is realized that from very small beginnings General Pershing had to build up by degrees what became a very large Army. What is not realized is that without him no American Army would have been in the war at all. Quite apart from the building-up process he carried out in France, General Pershing made the contribution of deciding to have an Army—and of setting about the task without delay. Had he marked time in Paris while someone in Washington waited for the question to arise; had he himself dawdled and wondered and pondered, or taken refuge in the fact that the Government had put no responsibility for prompt action upon him—in any of these events the A.E.F. would have been no more than a showing-the-flag proposition until *anno domini* 1919.

It was in no way surprising that the War Department had not made up its mind on this essential point before Pershing came on the scene. Practically speaking, there had been no such thing as an American Army in the field since the close of the Civil War. The force sent to Cuba in 1898 was not an organized field army but a hit or miss collection of regiments under a slapstick effort of improvised Headquarters and Staffs. Regulars, Volunteers, and National Guard units shoved their way forward to the pier at Tampa where the troopships lay helplessly waiting until they were taken by storm. Walter Millis, in *The Martial Spirit*, has recorded the unforgettable scene and the total innocence of any idea of method or organization which lay behind it.

The reorganization of the General Staff and the War Department by Elihu Root had allowed a new generation of

officers to set things in order and to make the Army conscious of the basic outlines of military organization in the contemporary world. But no army had actually come into being in this sense. The work in the Philippines, like the bushwhacking police operation against Villa, had



"Don't you think you should tidy up a bit before inspecting this Division, major?"

been carried along on the old regimental basis. A single company was a respectable force for the type of operations in hand; a battalion all in one place amounted to a rather important command. *Brigade* and *Division* were familiar military terms—but in the United States Army of 1914 no such thing existed in the flesh. No Division had existed since 1865, and the remark used to be made in France that even the highest officers of the Regular Army had never, before 1917, seen a full infantry brigade assembled and waiting the word of command. As for a field army fully set up with all its equipment and Services—even a modest force such as the British had sent to France in 1914—any such thing as this was known only to the paper studies of the War College. Furthermore, when Pershing arrived in Washington in May, 1917, fresh from the Mexican border, no preparations had been made for putting together any such phenomenon. Even the question as to whether the thing would be attempted had not been seriously considered.

In Washington, accordingly, Pershing was given command not of an army but of a remote and wholly questionable hypothesis. The Expeditionary Force he was to take to France was to consist of a single infantry Division, and even as to the future there was then no expectation of maintaining a larger con-

tingent in the field. Two days before Pershing's arrival in Washington these small expectations were carefully set down in a letter from the Secretary of War to the President—a letter published by Colonel Frederick Palmer in *The American Legion Monthly* of December, 1930, but which communication has passed practically unnoticed from that day to this.

May 8, 1917

My Dear Mr. President:

The plan for an expeditionary force to France is in this state:

I am directing General Pershing, by cipher despatch, to report in person to me in Washington. He has been confidentially informed of the object of this order. When he arrives here, I will have him select one or two trustworthy aides and go to France at once, sending back word upon important matters in connection with the expeditionary force which in the meantime will be assembled, consisting of about 12,000 men, all of them from the Regular Army, with the possible exception of one regiment

of marines, the Marine Corps being particularly anxious to participate in the first expedition, because of a tradition in the Marine Corps that it has always done so in our past history.

I have taken up with Mr. Denman the question of providing the transportation and he is studying the question. In the meantime, the force will be assembled and ready to send, and will be embarked even before General Pershing arrives in France, unless transportation difficulties intervene.

It has been determined that the force shall coöperate with the French land forces. Our present belief is that for this reason they should be armed in France, both with the French rifle and French artillery, the French Government having offered so to arm them and several other divisions of the same size if we send them over. The advantage of using French arms and ammunition is in not necessitating the transportation and supply of our own arms and ammunition and the maintenance of an uninterrupted supply, the French having an adequate supply on hand. So small a force would of course be unable to take over for its independent operation a portion of the front, and would have to be used as a mere division of the French army. An entirely different type of weapon and different size of ammunition would therefore be an element of confusion which ought to be avoided.

After this division is safely in France