

Did America Win World War I?

By Gene Fax

With the approach of the centennial of the 1918 Armistice, Americans have been bombarded with books and articles on how the United States won the First World War. A common theme is that Britain and France were powerless to break the four-year trench stalemate until the Americans turned up, showed them how to fight, and led the victorious final assault. Lines from a recent publication are typical: "John J. Pershing... led his inexperienced Army to a war none of the original participants knew how to win. Black Jack showed them how." **That's not what happened.**

Pershing's methods were based on the bayonet charge as used in the Civil War. Artillery and machine guns were distractions. "The rifle and the bayonet remain the supreme weapons of the infantry soldier," he wrote. They would break through the Germans' lines and defeat them in open country. This was the same philosophy of the offensive that in 1914 had produced over half a million French and British casualties and driven their armies into the trenches.

By mid-1917 the British, French, and Germans understood that the massed infantry assaults they had been using at the Somme, at Verdun, and in the Champagne served only to pile up the dead. All three armies then developed their versions of what is now called combined-arms operations: small-unit "infiltration" tactics, sophisticated artillery firing schedules, and above all, integration of infantry, artillery, airplanes, and (in the case of the Allies) tanks into a mutually supporting, carefully choreographed assault system. The Germans used these methods first in the spring of 1918, in a series of attacks that demolished two British armies and nearly broke through to Paris. Successful counterattacks by the French at Soissons and the British at Amiens led to a massive, coordinated Franco-Anglo-American offensive, the Hundred Days Campaign, that ended the war.

Initially the Americans knew nothing

of combined-arms tactics. Few of their infantry had ever trained with the artillery, virtually none with tanks. The major American assaults—at St. Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne in September 1918—combined old trench warfare methods with Pershing's bayonet tactics. Fortunately for the Yanks, their enemy by then was a remnant of his former self; had they faced the German army of 1917, the results would have been catastrophic. The American army learned its craft on the battlefield – in only nine weeks – and by the Armistice was an effective war machine. But the lesson cost many lives. As it was, the British and French together captured fourteen times as much territory in the Hundred Days as did the Americans, and vastly more prisoners and guns. The American attack in the Meuse-Argonne diverted German reinforcements away from the British and French, making their job easier; but the breakthrough that Pershing promised never occurred. So the superiority of American arms is a myth.

But in an important sense the Americans did win the war. By 1918 the Allied armies were tired and depleted; the Germans could reasonably have hoped for a negotiated peace that would give them parts of France and Belgium. The unexpected arrival of two million fresh, eager American soldiers stunned the Kaiser's generals – they realized they could never prevail. No matter how many Americans they killed, there would always be millions more. An armistice on the Allies' terms was their only option. The United States could claim much credit for ending the war. But its victory took place as much in the minds of the German generals as on the battlefield. ★

Gene Fax is the author of *With Their Bare Hands: General Pershing, the 79th Division, and the Battle for Montfaucon*, the paperback edition of which was published by Osprey in June. You can see more of his writings at genefaxauthor.com.



Let us remember them.

The aftermath of war. Pictures from top: Dead of the American 79th Division, September 1918; German guns captured by the Americans, December 1918; Armistice celebration of the 79th Division, November 1918; Victory parade of the US First Division in New York City, September 1919

PHOTOS ©US NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION