



# COMMENTARY



## PERSHING'S "OPEN WARFARE" DOCTRINE IN THE LIGHT OF AMERICAN MILITARY HISTORY

By Gene Fax

In May 1917, John J. Pershing became the first American general since the Civil War to lead a field army of more than a few thousand men. For most of the intervening time, the U.S. Army had had three main missions: protecting the coasts, quelling labor unrest, and chasing—but rarely fighting—Indians.<sup>1</sup> Pershing himself operated against Indians in the west, the Spanish in Cuba, Moros in the Philippines, and Pancho Villa in Mexico. None of these prepared him or the Army for the all-consuming war then going on in France. Pershing and the Army were largely unfamiliar with modern weapons, tactics, and logistics.

Yet Pershing knew how he wanted his new Army to fight. The trench-bound stalemate of the Western Front was not for him. "It was my opinion," he wrote in his memoirs, "that victory could not be won by the costly process of attrition, but it must be won by

driving the enemy out into the open and engaging him in a war of movement."<sup>2</sup> Americans, he believed, were inherently superior to the soldiers of other nations in their initiative and their aptitude for marksmanship.<sup>3</sup> In his statement of training principles he declared, "The rifle and the bayonet are the principal weapons of the infantry soldier. He will be trained to a high degree of skill as a marksman both on the target range and in field firing. An aggressive spirit must be developed until the soldier feels himself, as a bayonet fighter, invincible in battle."<sup>4</sup>

Pershing himself had observed the Russo-Japanese War, the first major conflict to use modern weapons. In his reports he described the results when Japanese infantry—paragons of aggressiveness—attacked strong entrenchments defended by machine guns and artillery. At the Siege of Port Arthur, Manchuria, almost all



(Left) 42d Division patrol near Hassavant Farm, France, 14 September 1918  
 (Above) View near the jump-off line of the 77th Division, 26 September 1918

of the infantry assaults failed with heavy losses; by the time the city surrendered, the Japanese had lost 65,000 men killed and wounded out of a maximum strength of 80,000. Replacements kept the Japanese army at full strength most of the time.<sup>5</sup> Yet virtually every training program and order Pershing's American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) would publish contained some variant of this exhortation: "The general principles governing combat remain unchanged in their essence . . . [T]he fundamental ideas enunciated in our drill regulations, small arms firing manual, field service regulations and other service manuals remain the guide for both officers and soldiers."<sup>6</sup> The regulations and manuals to which he referred derived ultimately from the combat doctrine developed by Maj. Gen. Emory Upton during and after the Civil War and took no notice of four years' worth of events in France. The Infantry Drill Regulations (IDR) of 1917 relegated machine guns to emergency use only. Artillery's sole mission was to support infantry attacks. The artillery's own service regulations, occupying three volumes, said of its combat role only this: "The reason for the existence of Field Artillery is its ability to assist the other arms, especially the Infantry, upon the field of battle."<sup>7</sup> That was it. The IDR ignored tanks and aircraft. To Pershing these were distractions from the rifle-and-bayonet assaults that capitalized on the unique character of the American soldier: individual initiative, aggressiveness, resourcefulness, and high morale.

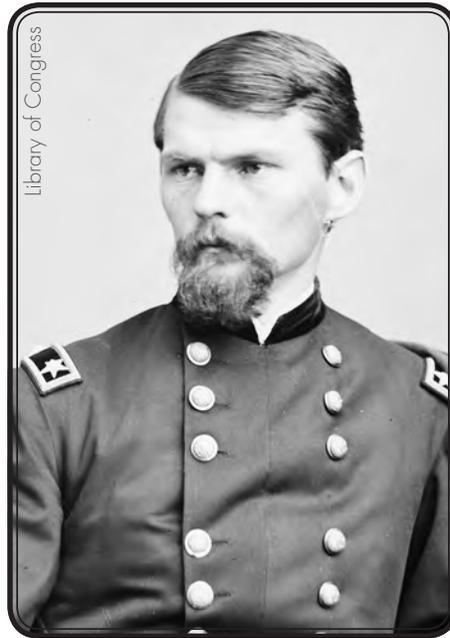
Actually, the history of American arms demonstrated just the opposite—that the infantry charge with rifle and bayonet was usually ineffective and always costly. When the Americans won, it was generally by other means. In the Revolutionary War, the colonial militias were useless in pitched battle and the Continental Army, trained by professionals like Baron von Steuben, was never able to meet the British Regulars on equal terms. They lacked the discipline to maneuver in combat and the expertise in volley fire that characterized the warfare of the period.<sup>8</sup> General John Burgoyne lost at Saratoga mainly because American militia, fighting as guerrillas, wore down his army while it was on the march. He surrendered when he failed to break Maj. Gen. Horatio L. Gates' defensive line and lost all hope of resupply for his badly depleted forces.<sup>9</sup> Gates then wasted an army by facing General Charles Cornwallis in a stand-up fight at the Battle of Camden, South Carolina, in 1780. A British contingent, slightly more than half the size of the Colonial force, routed the Americans, militia and regulars alike. At General George Washington's urging, Congress sent Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene to replace Gates, who, with other leaders such as Brig. Gen. Francis Marion, had conducted a successful partisan campaign against local British detachments. The final victory at Yorktown was a traditional siege operation, directed largely by America's French allies.<sup>10</sup>



General Pershing

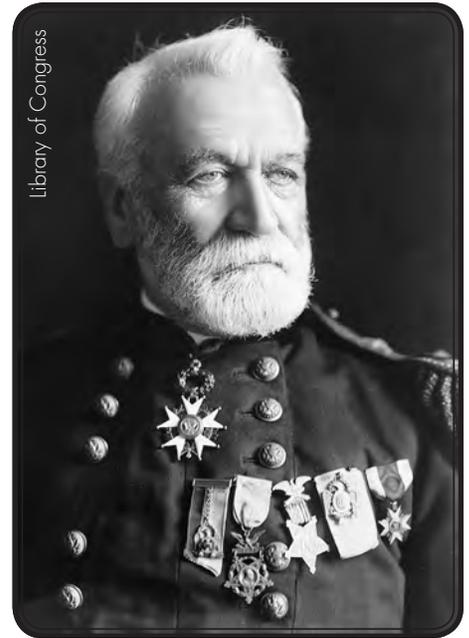
In the Mexican War, Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott captured Veracruz, Mexico, by siege and Mexico City by maneuver, avoiding fighting as much as possible. His subordinate Maj. Gen. Zachary Taylor believed in the bayonet as a primary weapon and disdained artillery. Taylor commanded 5,000 volunteers, most of them frontiersmen, plus a small force of regular artillery and dragoons. Ignoring orders to establish a defensive line, he advanced his little army to an exposed position deep inside Mexico. When General Antonio López de Santa Anna, commanding an army four times as large, moved to cut him off, Taylor retreated fifteen miles to a better position near Buena Vista, Mexico, to await the Mexican attack. Santa Anna maneuvered his troops brilliantly, at one point putting several American regiments to flight. But Taylor's artillery came up at just the right moment. Serving as a rallying point for the infantry and pouring fire into the Mexican ranks, the guns turned the tide. Santa Anna retreated with between 1,500 and 2,000 casualties; the Americans suffered fewer than half that.<sup>11</sup>

For Pershing's generation, the Civil War was the wellspring of Army doctrine. Pershing, who graduated West Point in 1886, was steeped in that war's history. The two superintendents while he was there—Major Generals Oliver Otis Howard and Wesley Merritt—had been well-known Civil War commanders. He remembered being impressed by visitors such as Generals Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, and Philip H. Sheridan.<sup>12</sup>



General Upton

The Army War College, founded in 1901, pioneered the intensive study of Civil War battles, including tours of the major eastern battlefields. The emphasis was on battles of maneuver—First and Second Bull Run, the Peninsula Campaign, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, the Wilderness, and Spotsylvania Court House in Virginia, Antietam in Maryland, and Gettysburg in Pennsylvania. But the most strategically important campaigns—Vicksburg, Mississippi, which cut the Confederacy in two; and Petersburg, Virginia, which ground the rebel army down until it ran out of men—were classic trench warfare operations and received little attention.<sup>13</sup> There were exceptions—First and Second Bull Run and Chattanooga, Tennessee, come to mind—but usually, even in that war of movement, the bayonet charge was a deadly mistake. Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan's assaults on General Robert E. Lee at Antietam, Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside's fourteen separate charges at Fredericksburg, General Braxton Bragg's repeated attacks on Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans' line at Stones River, Tennessee, all failed to achieve a tactical victory. Most infantry assaults, such as those in Grant's Overland Campaign, produced only mutual carnage, not a breakthrough. As crafty a tactician as Lee was, he suffered defeat on the three occasions he launched a frontal assault: Malvern Hill in the Peninsula Campaign, Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg, and the attempt to retake Fort Harrison outside Richmond, Virginia.<sup>14</sup>



General Howard, c. 1905

The charge with rifle and bayonet did not need the trenches of Petersburg to be rendered obsolete. It succumbed to the superiority of defensive weapons. The old smoothbore muskets had been effective only to one hundred yards, so infantry could get within bayonet-charging distance before they risked being hit by gunfire. The development of the minie ball and the consequent adoption of the rifled musket as the standard infantry weapon in the 1840s and '50s tripled that range. It cut down many attackers long before they could get close enough to use their bayonets. Frontal attacks became too costly to pursue—although it took some time to realize this—and the bayonet itself became obsolete as a weapon. In Grant's campaign in the summer of 1864, Union doctors recorded only thirty-seven bayonet wounds. In the entire Civil War, they noted only 922 bayonet wounds among the many hundreds of thousands of casualties treated.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps in advocating the infantry assault with fixed bayonets, Pershing had in mind Grant's capture of Missionary Ridge outside Chattanooga or the counterattack of the 20th Infantry Regiment, Maine Volunteers, at Little Round Top in Gettysburg. No doubt he recalled the charge up San Juan Hill, Cuba, in which he participated—although embedded journalist Richard Harding Davis reported that no troops used bayonets there.<sup>16</sup> But those seem thin precedents for a two-million-man Army fighting a mechanized war.



General Merritt

World War I did indeed bear out the historic role of the American infantryman with his rifle and bayonet, but not in the way Pershing intended. On 6 June 1918, four battalions of the 4th Brigade, U.S. Marines, part of the U.S. 2d Division, advanced through a wheat field toward Belleau Wood in northeastern France, bayonets fixed and rifles at port arms, but without an artillery barrage. German machine guns scythed them down. The Marines took the wood a

bit more than three weeks later after it had been thoroughly shelled.<sup>17</sup> In mid-July at nearby Soissons, the same division virtually repeated its performance, complete with wheat field. This time, utter surprise and the weak German positions allowed it to advance, but with inordinate casualties; by the end of its first two engagements almost half the division had been killed or wounded, gone missing, or been taken prisoner.<sup>18</sup> Pershing's staff concluded nevertheless, "The rifle again proved to be the chief weapon of the infantry soldier."<sup>19</sup>

In fact, Pershing's "open warfare" was merely a vague principle—almost a slogan—devoid of tactical content. The general asserted but never explained how an infantry charge would gouge the German machine gunners and artillerists out of their trenches and emplacements and hurl them into the green fields beyond.<sup>20</sup> Nor did he explain why the Americans would have greater success than the French had in 1914, when the same tactics earned them nothing but 300,000 to 400,000 casualties. By early 1918, the French, British, and German armies had developed combined-arms tactics that would shatter the static battlefield. But Pershing was not interested in learning from them. None of the many training manuals and schedules put out by his headquarters contained the examples, problems, map exercises, and maneuver plans that his officers needed to turn "open warfare" into a reality. None of



Richard Harding Davis, c. 1901

them even had the phrase in their titles. Maj. Gen. Hunter Liggett, then commanding I Army Corps, complained in a letter to General Headquarters on 1 April 1918 that none of the literature he had received explained how his division commanders should prepare their soldiers for open warfare. In March 1918, when the Germans stormed over the old Somme battlefield, destroying one British army and gravely damaging another, Pershing ascribed their success to "the intelligent initiative of junior officers and superiority of fire," and added, "Americans have inherent qualities in both these respects far superior to those of the Germans."<sup>21</sup> He ignored the true reasons for the German victory: infiltration by small, specialized units armed with a variety of infantry weapons, including grenades, light machine guns, and flamethrowers; combined-arms tactics with infantry, artillery, and aircraft providing mutual support; and intensive training in the new techniques months before the assault. Rifle fire and the bayonet were negligible contributors.

What is remarkable is that the soldiers of the AEF *did* possess individual initiative, aggressiveness, resourcefulness, and high morale—even the Germans acknowledged that. One of their intelligence officers reported after Belleau Wood, "The individual soldiers are very good. They are healthy, vigorous and physically well developed . . . The troops are fresh and full of straightforward confidence. A remark of one of the prisoners is indicative of their spirit:



1st Division Infantry on Montrefagne, north of Exermont, France, 11 October 1918



General Liggett, c. 1910

‘We kill or get killed.’<sup>22</sup> What they did not have was either an effective combat doctrine or the training to exercise it if they had it. Instead, the Americans taught themselves modern offensive methods while they were

fighting: advancing in small formations, using cover and fire-and-maneuver tactics, employing machine guns to support the advance, and digging in in anticipation of enemy artillery fire. They never did master the skills needed to work effectively with tanks and aircraft, which were too technical to learn on the battlefield. General Liggett, replacing Pershing as commander of First Army, reorganized the artillery so that light and heavy guns could quickly assist the infantry wherever support was needed.<sup>23</sup> The AEF taught itself in nine weeks the methods it had taken their allies four years to develop. Even so, it was the British and French who dominated the battlefield in the last months before the Armistice.

In the end, Pershing had to accept the reality of the battlefield, at least temporarily. On 29 August 1918, his headquarters issued combat instructions declaring that the conquest of the enemy’s main line of resistance, estimated to be three to four kilometers deep, called for “trench warfare methods . . . the operation must be planned in great detail and carried out according to a fixed schedule.”<sup>24</sup> His orders for the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, to

begin on 26 September, specified a set-piece battle: rigid divisional boundaries, artillery preparation followed by a creeping barrage, all divisions to attack straight ahead, and prescribed phase lines for the advance. But he still put his faith in the vigor and initiative of the American infantryman. He set the first day’s objective at a line as much as twenty kilometers beyond the jump-off position—a one-day penetration that none of his allies had ever achieved.<sup>25</sup> That line was not reached until 15 October.

Pershing maintained to the end of his life that the American rifleman, aided but not superseded by tanks, air, and artillery, was the primary weapon of war. In his memoirs, published in 1931, he wrote,

[T]he principles of warfare as I learned them at West Point [i.e., as derived from the Civil War] remain unchanged . . . The American soldier, taught how to shoot, how to take advantage of the terrain, and how to rely upon hasty entrenchment, shall retain the ability to drive the enemy from his trenches and, by the same tactics, defeat him in the open.<sup>26</sup>



An American 75-mm. gun firing toward Montsec from a position near Beaumont, 12 September 1918



American soldiers advancing to attack at Cantigny

In fact, it was the rapid improvement in American skills, especially in the use of combined arms, along with the deterioration of the German Army, which allowed the AEF to claim its share of the victory. But the war-winning breakthrough that Pershing promised his infantry doctrine would deliver never came.

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## NOTES

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