

2019/2/2 (EN): Pershing and America's World War I controversial contribution

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Would the American soldier fight? The Germans said, "No!" Would newly promoted Major General John J. Pershing be able to field an effective fighting force? American allies, the British and French, said, "We doubt it." Coming late to the battlefield in France, would the Americans, if indeed they could or would fight, be able to make a significant contribution to winning the war? Could an American Expeditionary Force (AEF) under Pershing even come to Europe considering it had to traverse a distance of over three thousand miles by sea infested by a huge and effective German submarine fleet? Once on the ground there were many among the combatants, who had been locked in combat since August 1914, who doubted that any meaningful American force could even arrive in time to make a difference. Would Pershing's emphasis on offensive combat find a place in trench warfare being practiced by the Allies upon arrival of the Americans? In the final analysis were the American conscript soldiers up to the same brutal effort their allies had made in the years before the entrance of the United States in the war? Ally and enemy alike were going to learn the answers to the questions and doubts, but not in 1917 and may be not even in 1918. By the latter date it might very well have been too late for the appearance of a viable AEF. The French had survived the German siege of Verdun in 1916 and gone on to mutiny after the failure of the Nivelle offensive. In 1917 they were stuck in their trenches. The final test for the conscript American soldiers, most new to the experience of extreme violence, was the September to 11 November operation. As hard as were the previous battles and the huge losses incurred, the Foch offensive was to give positive proof that the American soldier, when severely tested, was not to be found wanting. He proved to the German foe that he could, and would, fight well. He showed his French and British compatriots that he was worthy of being treated as their equal. As for Pershing, a stern and uncompromising commander who stood his ground against antagonists even those on his side of the war, his role as commander of the AEF was to be his crowning achievement. His highest ambition was to accomplish his mission of making a significant, if not the entire, contribution to winning the war against the Central Powers. There is little doubt, through all his trials and tribulations, he succeeded.

