

IN QUEST OF GENERAL PERSHING

BY FRANK E. VANDIVER

GEORGE SANTAYANA once observed that "an attempt to rehearse the inner life of everybody that has ever lived would be no rational endeavor," and obviously he is right. Biographers, "picklocks" in Stephen Benét's phrase, consequently are forced to some standard of judgment in choosing a subject. Often this standard is hard to see, harder to understand, but presumably it exists. The standard is made up of multiple considerations. Market, for one: Will the subject make into a salable package? Crass? Yes, but compensation is a vital concern to scholars, even though their persistent penury appears to belie it! Availability of sources is another consideration: Is the subject sufficiently important to have attracted public attention and hence won notice in the press and the salon? These questions lead to an obvious consideration: Is the subject worth all the trouble he will surely cause the prospective picklock biographer?

There are other considerations. One that may directly affect most biographers is a matter of opinion: What does the biographer think of his subject? Does he like his man; does he loathe him? I think a writer must come to feel strongly one way or the other—a pallid neutrality toward a subject can hardly lead to lasting zeal in research and inquiry. If he likes his man, can a blend of sympathy and understanding

EDITOR'S NOTE: This address was presented at the annual dinner of the Beta of Texas Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa held at the Cohen House on May 2, 1962. Dr. Vandiver is Professor of History and Chairman of the Department of History and Political Science at the University. Distinguished as a historian of the Confederacy, he has recently begun a study of the life and career of General John J. Pershing.

be achieved without crossing the line into hero worship? If he actively dislikes his man, can he yet study him with detachment, balance merit and malevolence?

Once a subject is selected, the biographer is ready to begin "living" with his man, possibly for years. Usually this process involves a large degree of identification—the student comes to share the pride and prejudice of his hero, comes to like his friends and fight his foes. This is a good thing, if kept in bounds—but when the biographer finds that he takes as a personal insult any slur on his man, then he has identified too successfully. The result of such alter egoism can be passionate prose, but is usually poor history.

How, then, can the scholar walk a conscience line between fact and fiction, reality and romance? There is, I fear, no hard and fast rule, no easy panacea. He must always keep an eye toward creeping panegyric, but not to the point of losing the art of biography—for biography is most of all a literary art. It is, too, an integral part of history, hence is also a muse and subject to Olympian whimsies and deceits. The best guard against excess bias is broad research, careful analysis, and honest writing.

Nothing is more fascinating nor more frustrating than an attempt to understand people. When people are historical, wrapped in the myths of time, fascination and frustration are irritatingly magnified. And that surely is one reason why there are so many biographers—the challenge of the medium is constant. It is certainly one of the reasons why I persist in the field. And for myself there is a consideration I have not yet mentioned—one which I hope has pushed others into the genre: a kind of escapism, a desire to share, even vicariously, the doing of large deeds.

Any history graduate student who can recite his methodology catechism will tell you that the subject selected indicates a great deal about the biographer. I devoutly hope this isn't true—since I am invariably intrigued by generals everyone else regards as dull, unbearable, or crazy!

John J. Pershing was neither dull nor crazy: he seems often to have been unbearable. But he intrigues me. Why? I hesitate to offer the obvious answer. Some legitimate reasons are that he had much to do with winning the First World War, that he molded a modern American army, that he had great force and fortitude and held that army together despite Allied pressure to break it up and feed it to the Germans piecemeal. Surely these achievements suffice for interest in a man? Yes, but there is much more to Pershing than his cold efficiency. Behind his chilly eyes and sculptured face lurks a personality I would like to know.

The usual biographical data is easy enough to come by, for few men in the twentieth century have had so much written about them in the public prints. Born, near Laclede, Missouri, September 13, 1860; was graduated from the U. S. Military Academy, July 1, 1886; LL.B., University of Nebraska, 1893; active cavalry duty against the Apache, Sioux, and Cree; professor of military science and tactics, University of Nebraska; instructor in tactics, U. S. Military Academy, to May 5, 1898, when transferred at own request to active duty in Cuba; participated in pacification of Philippines; served as official General Staff observer in Russo-Japanese War, 1904-05; promoted over 800 senior officers from captain to brigadier general, 1906, by President Theodore Roosevelt; led the Punitive Expedition against Pancho Villa, 1916-17; was selected to lead U. S. Expeditionary Force in Europe, and commanded it, 1917-18; promoted to chief of staff, U. S. Army, 1921-24; served on Battle Monuments Commission after the war, and on various other government commissions; died at Walter Reed Hospital, Washington, D. C., July 15, 1948.

Such biographical details are the framework of a man's life—the bare bones on which to build him from the records. How can these stark facts evoke Pershing's personality, his character? They cannot, of course, but they do serve as

guides to collecting the sort of data which possibly will lend understanding.

Military biography is a combination of understanding, research, interpretation, and background. A soldier must be understood in his time, discovered in the records of contemporaries, interpreted by contemporary standards, and portrayed on as large a scale as possible. Hopefully, then, incidents blend into experiences, experiences into traits, traits into characteristics, characteristics into personality. Everything is important in the molding of a soldier, especially things in his youth and education. Too often military biographies ignore the early years and leap into a general's campaigns without adequate explanation of how and why the general acted as he did.

In Pershing's case, to ignore West Point, to minimize his long cavalry service in the West in varied Indian campaigns would leave unexplained his firm grasp of the whole structure of the U. S. Army and his identification with lasting tradition and accepted tactics. Failure to consider these early wars against the red men would make Pershing's success against the Philippine Moros less intelligible—for, although the Moro campaigns were waged in different terrain than the Great Plains, the techniques of little unit actions were much the same. Early combat experience stood Pershing in good stead.

So, too, his experience as commander of Mindanao, and later as governor of the island. Full charge of a geographical department gave him a grasp of large-scale army administration which would make easier his command in Mexico against Villa, and in France against Lloyd George, Georges Clemenceau, Marshal Foch, and the Germans.

When Pershing led his 15,000 men into Mexico against Pancho Villa in March, 1916, he opened a new phase of U.S. military history. Much about this force resembled the old army—lots of cavalry went along, and it was well suited to the vast, arid wastes of northern Chihuahua. Strong infantry

columns went too, for current doctrine proclaimed that no ground could be properly held without the "queen of battles." Field artillery units were counted among Pershing's contingents, since artillery shared the spotlight with infantry as a combat requisite. But several new ingredients were added.

The U.S. Army, always slow to incorporate novel inventions (or ideas), looked long and hard at the modern machine gun after its introduction around 1890. Dubious about the practicality of the new weapon, the Ordnance Department nonetheless felt the Punitive Expedition gave a chance to test it under field conditions—and the machine guns which accompanied Pershing were among the first (except Gatling guns) ever tried in combat by the army. In addition, the Signal Corps dispatched a field radio unit to test the practicality of rapid communications. A motorized company brought trucks to Mexico to supplement the familiar army wagon and usher in entirely new logistics.

Most dramatic of all the innovations, though, was the aeroplane—the eight JN-4's of the First Aero Squadron, under command of Captain Benjamin Foulois.

Many participants in the Punitive operations look back on them with amused nostalgia—the whole thing has taken on a comic opera hue in retrospect. Almost nothing worked according to plans, including the plans.

Villa, the wraith of the desert, vanished into the vastness of north Mexico, struck at widely scattered points, nipped at Yankee outposts, and always broke his force into small units which rode off in myriad directions. A sort of Robin Hood myth cloaked Villa's brigandage; his men were welcomed in each hamlet and hovel—and the despised *gringos* gained no admittance anywhere.

Pershing had to probe deep into Mexico to find Villa, and extended his lines as he went until the communications network stretched some 100 miles from Colonia, Dublan, Chihuahua, to Columbus, New Mexico. The trucks did fairly

well, but finally ran short of fuel and repair parts and when that happened, the antique army wagons toiled past them day after day—producing some highly original cussing on the part of the truck drivers! Beyond Colonia, communications became even more difficult; hence Pershing set up his advance base here and pushed further into the interior with cavalry columns.

The military situation, quite apart from the logistical one, proved a strategist's nightmare. Orders from the War Department—really from President Wilson himself—restricted Pershing's movements to north-south roads, denied him the railroads (he used them surreptitiously), and allowed entrance into towns only with the permission of local officials. Presumably the government of President Carranza cherished a whimsical friendship for the U.S., and Carranzista officials were counted on to afford aid and comfort. In practice, Carranza's followers, sharing their leader's feelings, resented Yankee intrusion into Mexican affairs and often hindered as much as diplomacy would permit. Things degenerated by late 1916 and early 1917 to the point of Carranzistas and Villistas both firing on Pershing's men. On several occasions, notably in the actions of Carrizal and Parral, Carranzistas proved more formidable antagonists than Villa's veterans. At Carrizal, Pershing's cavalry encountered Mexican troops guarding the approaches to the town. The troopers sought and were denied permission to enter the village, whereupon they dismounted, deployed, and charged a line of Mexican infantry. Two machine guns, hidden along a creek bank, cut the Yanks to bits, and ought to have taught a lesson regarding machine guns and massed infantry. But no one learned the lesson, save perhaps the Mexicans. Pershing certainly did not—at the moment.

Carranza's reluctant assistance disrupted Pershing's plans, and convinced him and his superiors that full-scale war with Mexico could hardly be avoided—but he tried. Enforcing iron discipline, he held his men to assigned scouts, to limited com-

bat and efficient hazing of Villa's scattered bands. At Ojos Azules, the U. S. Cavalry at last hit a large segment of Villa's force, broke it into bits, and permanently curtailed the bandit leader's strength. Months were yet to pass ere the Yankees quit Mexico, but Villa's vengeance never came, and pacification was achieved—even as in Mindanao.

Traditional weapons had done this job. The machine guns? They never had anything to shoot at, save jack rabbits and cactus. The planes did perform valuable service—according to Benjamin Foulois, now a retired major general in the USAF. Their most notable contribution saved the expedition's Medical Department from disaster. No, planes were not used to fly out the wounded or fly in vaccine or anything that prosaic: their engines were drained of castor oil when the doctor's supply ran out, and hence an old army medical tradition went unbroken! The radio? Very effective, extremely useful—at about twenty miles. Beyond that distance messages were sent by plane, by telegraph, or by mounted courier.

If success stood as the test of utility of new weapons, all these novel inventions could well be scrapped. And there were military men who drew that happy conclusion from the Mexican venture. Not Pershing. If everything had not worked well, he recognized that this was largely due to the curious nature of the campaign, and that the potential of rapid-fire guns, of radios and planes had been amply demonstrated. And he learned a great deal about how to work all these new tools into the traditional arms of the service, how to make them serve as part of the military machine. His dedication to them would come clear in France.

More than his appreciation of things modern, Pershing took useful lessons in tactics with him out of Mexico. At West Point he had been constantly exposed to stock ideas of the virtue of finding the enemy, fixing him in position, fooling him, and fighting him—always carry the war to the enemy. Attack! Attack with the infantry—sweep the field with the

bayonet! This archaism lingers yet in military doctrine, despite impressive statistics to show that few, if any, battles have been decided by a bayonet charge. But the essential ingredient of the attack is mobility, and this remains a vital factor in war. Pershing's appreciation of mobility had been growing steadily as he fought the elusive plains Indians, the nimble Moros, and Villa's superb light cavalry. Mobility would prove the keystone of his plans for American participation in the European War.

That he was selected to lead the American Expeditionary Force in France could hardly have surprised many people. No other U.S. commander could boast equal experience in all types of combat leadership or equal familiarity with modern weapons and logistics. No other commander had a father-in-law serving on the Senate Military Affairs Committee. And—perhaps a vital consideration—no other commander looked so typically a modern major general.

Wilson selected Pershing, gave him direct orders to hold the American forces together (a point Pershing never mentioned—he took all the blame for this unpopular stand), and the President promised to sustain him with all Executive power.

When Pershing and a thirty-man staff arrived in France in June, 1917, the Allied situation looked poor indeed. Hundreds of divisions of British, French, and satellite troops were mired in 400 miles of trenches—a system of ditches which stretched like a scar from Switzerland to the English Channel—an angry scar festering barbed wire and blood. War had sharply changed from a thing of swift movement to a stalemate. Gargantuan armies looked at one another across bits of pocked, gas-steeped, seething No Man's Land; here and there one of them would heave out of the Augean mud, rush across some shell-torn reach of Hell into the deadly chatter of machine guns, gain at best a useless yard, and lapse exhausted into the awful ooze. Time and again the leading Allied military "brains" hurled their legions into this

maw of machine guns—so often that death lost its hallow. Millions, literally millions, of men lay smashed along the Western Front. So many were dead by mid-1917 that a mutiny broke out the French army, a mutiny against the ossified idiocy of generals who conjured such slaughter.

Marshal Ferdinand Foch, Allied commander in France, counted the cost of the war, totaled the casualties, eyed the remaining reserves, and announced early in 1917 that the Allies could not last another year without great assistance from America. German estimates of the western situation coincided with Foch's, and lured Field Marshal Erich Ludendorff to plan victory in 1918—before American help could arrive in decisive force.

During the remainder of 1917 Pershing fought with the Supreme Allied War Council to retain autonomy of American troops—he could not, by Wilson's order, permit distribution of U.S. units throughout the wasted Allied divisions. He wanted, and finally got, permission to create a separate U.S. army with its own sector of responsibility and its own command. Beyond men and a few hundred machine guns, Pershing could, for some time, bring little else to France. Artillery and ammunition, planes, and all kinds of transport had to come from hard-pressed French and British depots. But vindication came in the spring and summer of 1918 during Ludendorff's great Marne offensive. At Cantigny, Belleau Wood, and Chateau Thierry, American troops, under their own leaders, using Pershing's cherished tactics of mobility, proved superior to German crack divisions and earned their place in the war. In September the Americans attacked the venerable St. Mihiel salient, broke it, and then shifted to join in Foch's crusher offensive in the Meuse-Argonne—the last big push of the war. When all of it ended on November 11, 1918, the American Army could justly claim a decisive role in the final victory.

Pershing reaped the laurels of a Great Captain. He represented the New Look in generals—although well blooded in

combat, he had rarely visited the French front. Back of the lines, at the desk and the council table, on the telephone and the transatlantic wire, he had won his war. War had become so large an enterprise that high command now required administrative, executive, and business talent as well as practical diplomacy. Pershing served as a business executive, presided over the largest enterprise ever sustained by the United States, and coordinated the baffling facets of a gigantic war effort. And with victory, he ranked not only as an American hero, but also as a world figure. And so he was till he died.

Countless foreign decorations were given him, Congress named him General of the Armies in 1919 (a rank previously held by one other American, George Washington), he served as Chief of Staff of the Army and worked to modernize it in the 1920's. Such eminence made him a natural for various international commissions, and in the 20's and 30's he tried his hand at peacemaking.

With the coming of the Second World War, General George C. Marshall, Pershing's old aide and staff officer, sought his advice in frequent consultations, and Pershing seems to have had an active role in war planning.

When he died in 1948, all Americans were conscious that a great figure had gone from the scene. But what did they know of him? Only that, like Lee, he was a "marble man," who defied approach or understanding, who remained the portrait of a soldier, ramrod straight, grim-faced, immaculate. Stories circulated briefly about him, and most indicated that he barely missed being a martinet—or worse—that he was successful, but that he could hardly be called a true soldier. Like Grant before him, he had organized victory, but had not fought for it. And above all, he came to legend a formidable man, one beyond liking.

He was all the things legend makes him. But the résumé of his career shows him much deeper and more experienced than the surface image.

Since he lived so long, many survive who knew him, and this appears to make possible a much more accurate reconstruction than would be the case with a figure of the remote past. Surely all that need be done is interview many of his acquaintances, correlate their impressions, and the "real" Pershing will emerge. He won't. With only limited experience, as yet, in the new dimension of oral history, I can already attest to the various veracity of eyewitnesses. Most of the people surviving who served under Pershing were subordinate to him—and a subordinate sees only the sternest face of his general. Almost all of these witnesses recall a cold, hard, book-type soldier, one to be admired but not loved. Those who served with him in the Punitive Expedition—General Benjamin Foulois, General Courtney Hodges, General William Simpson—all noted his aloofness in Mexico and put it down at the time to certain defects in his ancestry.

Here is where background data helps, where research into written history is essential. Married in 1905 to Frances Warren, daughter of Senator Francis Warren of Wyoming, Pershing thrived on a happy home life and on his three daughters and son until 1915. In August, 1915, a fire razed part of the San Francisco Presidio and killed Frances and the three girls. Not long later, the bereaved husband and father led the expedition against Villa. If he remained aloof, seemed grim and unbending, is it surprising?

But beyond the light which the written record will shed—including Pershing's own two-volume account of *My Experiences in the World War* (which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1932), his voluminous papers in the Library of Congress and in the possession of his son Warren in New York—beyond the written record, much more will have to come from surviving friends and acquaintances. I wish I could claim a scientific system of locating these people, but I can't. Lists of former military associates have been checked for survivors—and these led to the men I have mentioned. News accounts of General Emilio Aguinaldo's health led me to work for an interview

with him in the Philippines—and I hope I get there in time. And luck, plain simple luck—the historian's greatest asset!—has led me to an obscure and vital collection of papers in Arizona relating to the Punitive Expedition, and to tapes of an interview with Miss May Pershing, the General's sister, in which she talks much about her brother's love life.

Years of interviewing, reading, piecing, and sorting remain. And perhaps, after it's all done, Pershing will still stand a cold block of marble, aloof and unfriendly. But I don't think so. I'm convinced that I would have liked him, given the chance. I'm looking for the Pershing behind the starched tunic, the man Mrs. William Simpson talks about when she says that he could enter a room full of men and suddenly be the *only* man any woman would see. Many who met him remarked him handsome and cold—but some found him exciting, magnetic, enticing. What was he really like?