Unprepared in the Face of Hell: Wartime Leadership, 1917-1918

This article seeks to identify several reoccurring problems in the officer leadership of the United States Army at the platoon and squad level in France during World War I. In 1914, a series of events between Austria, Russia, Germany, Serbia, France, and Great Britain led to the war. By 1917, the contest had raged in Europe for three years, collapsing into a stalemate as the U.S. entered. The problems with the performance of the military on the Western Front have often been blamed on senior officers, who perhaps unfairly received the disciplinary actions of American Expeditionary Force commander General John Pershing. Although the Army carried out a successful campaign, the performance of junior officers under this crucible of fire demonstrated the weakness in their pre-war training.

The success of the campaign waged by the U.S. military cannot be diminished. But victory on the battlefield does not indicate the quality of the performance of an individual group. Allan Millet and Williamson Murray explained, “Victory is an outcome of battle; it is not what a military organization does in battle.” By examining the performances of junior officers in combat during World War I many of the issues which shaped the reforms of the Interwar period emerges. Several cases demonstrate the behaviors that were unwanted in officers and hindered the performance of particular units.  

Junior officers, responsible for performance on the tactical level, managed “the movement of forces on the battlefield against the enemy, the provision of destructive fire upon..."
enemy forces or targets, and the arrangement of logistical support directly applicable to engagements.” Conversely, problematic behaviors by officers demonstrated an inability to motivate morale, a tendency towards flight or cowardice, as well as displaying the lack of knowledge of general tactics. Timothy Nenninger summed up the performance of junior officers during the war: “While even the harshest critics considered most American junior officers ‘gallant and brave,’ many platoon leaders lacked tactical skill, ‘could not hold their units together,’ or generally proved unable to maintain discipline.”

The U.S. Army was aware of but inexperienced in the developments of warfare that had occurred in the early twentieth century. The only large scale operation it had recently conducted was the pursuit of Pancho Villa on the Mexican Border in 1916-1917, a cat and mouse affair led by then Brigadier General John J. Pershing. However, Allied leaders were concerned with the training and officer material that American forces brought to the Western front. Both British General George T. M. Bridges and French hero General Joseph Joffre were willing to offer their countries services for training. Joffre suggested, “the biggest problem would lie in the training of new officers and noncommissioned officers,” an observation offered during a national tour designed to motivate the United States to enter the war.

While the force in Mexico was unable to capture Pancho Villa, it provided an opportunity for officers to lead men in larger units. Still, “it was ludicrous to believe that an American army that had stumbled all over itself in trying to locate Pancho Villa could now produce officers necessary to operate.” However, the operations on the border provided the Regular Army and National Guard with an opportunity to train. The field experience served as the only training

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opportunities, besides regular routine, for the military before entrance into the war. The selection of the commander of the Mexican Expeditionary Force as the leader of the American presence in France, now Major General Pershing, was the only viable choice.\(^4\)

Pershing was saddled with attempting to organize the American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.) swollen by a national draft and unaccustomed to large unit action. Allied military leaders believed that the country lacked “trained and experienced officers needed to guide a vast military undertaking.” This was directly relevant to the tactical developments Pershing sought to implement. He envisioned the use of a “square division,” a formation twice the size as the units being utilized by the European nations in the conflict. Having an increased number of infantry personal, this organization was designed to take advantage of openings in the enemy lines. However, the use of the square division also enabled Pershing to concentrate the few trained officers he had at the higher levels of command with a larger number of soldiers serving under each individual.\(^5\)

By 1917, the Western Front had stalemated into a war of attrition. After the initial invasion by the German army under the auspices of an abridged Schlieffen Plan, the combatants settled into an uneasy situation. The collective defensive power of the machine gun and advanced field artillery prompted the trench warfare that carved the landscape of France into a honeycomb of blood and mud. Trench warfare was a bottom up creation during the war, “French


\(^5\) Donald Smythe, *Pershing: General of the Armies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 37; Zieger, *America’s Great War*, 93. A square division contained over 28,000 soldiers. The First Division was organized as follows “it contained two infantry brigades (1st and 2nd), each with two infantry regiments (16th, 18th, 26th, and 28th).” The distinguishing factor would be the fact that the division contained four infantry regiments, where the European standard of the time was a triangular division with only three regiments of infantry. James Scott Wheeler, *The Big Red One: America’s Legendary 1st Infantry Division from World War I to Desert Storm* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 3.
infantry essentially imposed a new tactical system on their military leadership.”6 In his annual report in 1919, Chief of Staff Peyton C. March addressed the aspect of trench warfare and its effect on the A.E.F.:

Trench warfare, as it had developed during this war, had demonstrated the necessity of standardizing and making uniform methods of instruction and of perfecting them by constant exchange of information between the front and the rear. It was necessary that every lesson learned and method found successful in the war should be utilized in our camps of instruction and various schools. The living had to learn the lesson of the dead in order to obtain greater successes with less casualties.7

The unpreparedness of the Army was evident. Not only did the European leaders believe that the American were unable to establish an independent army but they also imagined American leaders as unable to command one, should it appear. However, the unpreparedness was also evident to many American officers. George C. Marshall pointed out that the staff for the First Division “met for the first time aboard the boat,” which was destined to take them to France. The First Division, while a Regular Army unit, was composed of many replacements. They were the first unit to go to France, possessing both “the handicap as well as the honor of being first.” In a report issued in 1919 by the A.E.F. Superior Board, the unpreparedness and its effect were noted: “Control [of a unit] can be secured only by well trained and competent leaders. Unfortunately, on account of our policy of unpreparedness, such men were not available and untrained soldiers thrown upon their own resources or under untrained leaders were too often found in the line of battle.”8

Pershing sought to enforce the same discipline he had experienced as a cadet at West Point, taking “time to make his army thoroughly as an officer was made out of a plebe at West

Point.” Pershing wrote in his memoirs, “In the beginning our army was without the discipline that comes with training.” He set out to rectify these perceived problems. “The loyalty, readiness and alertness indicated by strictest adherence to this principle will immensely increase the pride and fighting spirit of our troops. The slovenly, unmilitary, careless habits that have grown up in times of peace in our Army are seriously detrimental to the aggressive attitude that must prevail.”

The initial American troops sent over to the Western Front were untrained replacements serving as placeholders in Regular Army units. The veteran soldiers from these units had been pulled out and kept stateside to prepare the remaining soldiers. The cannibalizing of early units “left one trained man to stiffen and educate three recruits.” In order to compensate for the short, ill-prepared training delivered stateside, Pershing’s early plans for France included an additional training period under European and then American instructors. Eventually, Pershing demanded that American officers and soldiers train solely with American instructors in order to “minimize what he considered the perverse influence of the Allies.” However, “even after considerable military training, men were found in every command who … could not be taught to realize the moral obligations of loyalty and obedience to constituted authority.” Pershing established a school system that was to overtake the garrison system, by centralizing education in Europe, with a primary focus on “instruction and training of officers with a view to securing uniform and efficient training of troops.”

Many experts predicted that the United States would be unable to fight independently of its European associates until 1919 or 1920. A key factor in this reasoning was the undermanned officer corps. “The War Department had neither an adequate General Staff nor an effective Chief of Staff to head it,” however, the few officers that composed the General Staff performed well, thanks to the advanced education they had received at the War College under Arthur Wagner. But the education received by the junior officers was not equal to those who attended the War College. At the lower levels of the education system, the lessons of European conflict between 1914 and 1916 had “caused no modification to the curriculum.” Even though the military secured some 200,000 officers through a variety of processes, many of the officers had a limited education that failed to address new developments. Secretary of War Newton Baker noted, “One of the most serious problems confronting the War Department in April, 1917, was the procurement of sufficient officers to fill the requirements of the divisions.” Many officers were sent into battle “with an outdated military education.”

In order to fill the demand for officers, the United States government fell back on the Plattsburgh ideal, which preparedness proponents had been advocating for some time. On 17 April 1917, the first official Officer Training Camp (O.T.C.) was instituted. Many of the graduates from this first course of training stayed in the U.S. as instructors rather than see combat in France, as “the actual day to day training had to be done by new men: 26,000 new company-grade officers, lieutenants and captains.” The course was to be a three month trial of

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physical strain, mental discipline, and intestinal fortitude, which pushed many young recruits to their limits. Of the 40,000 initial candidates, only 27,341 were commissioned in August 1917.12

The demand for officers did not decrease during the war. An early estimate of officer requirements suggested that it was necessary to secure a minimum of 200,000 men to lead and train troops. The Regular officer corps, and other sources immediately available such as the National Guard, provided 18,000 officers. An additional 70,000 civilians received commissions into specialized fields such as medicine and 16,000 enlisted soldiers received direct commissions. The military still required 96,000 officers to fill its ranks; the O.T.C.’s eventually contributed 86,000.13

The relative success of the first O.T.C. led to the formation of several additional camps. In August 1917, a second series of camps began, which graduated 17,237 officers. On 5 January 1918, a third camp convened. This camp was designed to produce only line officers, as departments created their own staff officers. The ninety-day course was deemed too short to properly train staff officers. This did not shake the faith which was placed in the O.T.C., however. The belief remained that the camps were the best source of officers, given the current situation, for “they furnished the best system that could be devised for quickly furnishing a large number of subordinate officers.” The camps did not expect to create more than rudimentary skill in the young men entering their fold.14

In planning for an intensive course of training for three months, there was no thought that trained officers could be produced in that short period of time. It was believed, however, that some of the necessary fundamentals could be taught, and that the course would

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12. The “Plattsburgh idea” refers to the camps established to train volunteer citizens to become officers in time of war. These camps were attended by college educated business, and supported by groups such as the Harvard Club, and individuals like Leonard Wood and Theodore Roosevelt. March, Annual Report 1919, 299; Palmer, America, 3; Robert Asprey, In Belleau Wood (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1965), 99; Meirion and Susie Harries, The Last Days of Innocence: America at War 1917-1918 (New York: Random House, 1997), 103.
permit the selection of those who showed that they were capable of becoming instructors and leaders of soldiers.\textsuperscript{15}

On 15 May 1918, a fourth O.T.C. was instituted. The raw material for this series was drawn from the enlisted ranks and the relatively new R.O.T.C. which had been instituted under the National Defense Act of 1916. Some of the enlisted men selected for officer training were appointed against their will, “having no desire to receive officer commissions.” During the war, the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (R.O.T.C.) programs at most higher education schools, often still in a rudimentary early stage, were suspended in favor of Students’ Army Training Corps (S.A.T.C.), a voluntary institution created in October 1918. While the fourth O.T.C. camp was intended to be run according to divisions, it was “found necessary to transfer the men from their divisions and establish central officers’ training schools.” An additional course began in June 1918, and demand for replacement officers in the expanding new National Army that developed on the Western Front required graduation of the remaining courses ahead of time. The class was to graduate on 15 November 1918, four days after the eventual armistice, but instead graduated on 15 October 1918, thus shrinking the ninety-day course to sixty days.\textsuperscript{16}

According to William Menkel, “The camps are a kind of hot-house West Point, minus the academic work and its theoretical training—plus some very practical up-to-date war lessons.” Edward Coffman stated, “At best, the military education provided [to] these new cadres was rudimentary.” One young second lieutenant, after graduating from an O.T.C., agreed with Coffman’s sentiment, “My duties are many; my ignorance beyond plumbing. I am quite lost…..” The training these raw recruits received was basic and the idea that they would teach the ideals of soldiering to the new conscripts being sent to join the front was, as one young officer

\textsuperscript{15} March, \textit{Annual Report 1919}, 300.
identified, “a case of the blind leading the blind.” Another telling sign of the inabilities of the O.T.C. arose in September 1918 when nearly 2,000 graduates of the first camp, who had been instructors at the additional camps, and the new troops, were sent to France. Immediately upon arrival they required a five week course on the duties of a platoon commander, the very people they had been instructing.\(^{17}\)

The O.T.C.’s developed at the onset of war and were not the true embodiment of the preparedness movement, nor what many military leaders of the time would have liked to have implemented. The expansion of the officer corps during the war, necessary to create some semblance of a modern army, in the opinion of March, was “improvised and uncoordinated, “and as a result “Military efficiency… was hampered by the supply of officers constantly lagging behind the demand.” The enlargement of the officer corps under this haphazard procurement and distribution program threaten the condition of discipline in the A.E.F., and “gave promise of leading to most serious difficulties.”\(^{18}\)

The O.T.C. was not the only source of new officers for the military. West Point, which contributed a large number of the high ranking officers of the A.E.F.s, had the drastic measures of the War Department forced upon it, as well. On 11 February 1918, a bulletin was issued stating, “Vacancies in the grade of second lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers shall henceafter be filled… by promotions from the Corps of Cadets at the United States Military Academy.”\(^{19}\) This was not the only way in which the Academy suffered in an attempt to alleviate the pressure of the officer shortage.

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As early as October 1917, Pershing was concerned with the lack of proficient leaders. In a letter to Baker, he complained of the “scarcity of trained officers.” By the summer of 1918, a shortage of officers still existed but was compounded by the lack of officer material candidates. Political and military leaders were cautious of drawing too deeply from the higher education system, save a war continuing indefinitely. College students then became the only possible source of educated men. An example of the difficulties in finding officers can be seen in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Division. While in France, the 2\textsuperscript{nd} had only a single officer commanding every twenty-three enlisted soldiers when pre-war standards were half that number.\textsuperscript{20}

Late in the war, the depths of society were scoured for candidates of potential to serve as replacement officers. While an acute problem, if World War I had continued past November 1918, the situation could have developed into a disaster, according to March’s 1919 report. Added to procurement problems, the influenza epidemic also interfered with training from September until the end of the war in November.\textsuperscript{21} The O.T.C., while sufficient in a time of need, was incapable of providing completely trained junior officers, in the opinion of many. The Inspector General reported, “There are certain things, such as the care of men in barracks and camps, which can only be learned by experience. This lack of experience, especially among officers of subordinate rank, regimental and company officers, was fully demonstrated in our mobilization camps.”\textsuperscript{22}

The training of junior officers did not stop when they graduated from O.T.C. or left West Point. In France, officers, rather than entering directing into a combat area, underwent further training under the visage of French, British, and American instructors by the end of the war. Early in the A.E.F.’s creation, a lack of officers experienced in trench warfare and the modern

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\item[20.] Pershing, My Experiences, 1: 189; March, Annual Report 1919, 320; USAWW 3: 538.
\item[21.] March, Annual Report 1919, 310 and 321.
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combat required of American soldiers caused them to train under European masters. William Odom noted, “Europeans taught the Americans the fine points of combat on the modern battlefield, and, in doing so, introduced them to large-scale wartime training programs.” Of course, the Army had experienced trench warfare as an institution during the American Civil War, both at the sieges of Vicksburg and Petersburg, among others. However, modern developments in technology, the devastating power of the machine gun and accuracy of artillery fire, and little emphasis on historical lessons, forced many experienced officers to return to the past lessons.

French and British instructors were not enthused with the Americans they were taking under their respective wings. “The 1st Division lacked discipline… officers were lazy and careless in caring for their men.” Colonel H.B. Fiske, the Assistant Chief of Staff of the G-5, responsible for American training, commented that “Neither the French nor the British believe in our ability to train men or in the value of the methods adopted by us.” The U.S. government requested French officers to assist in training during the war, at one point stating that “…the advice and assistance of individual French officers, which have proved so valuable to the 1st Division, is enormously desired.”

Even late in the war, the French showed little respect for Americans. One officer commented, “Aside from their limited combat experience, the combat value of the Americans suffers from faulty and too brief training.” General Henri Petain, the French commander, particularly held the American officers in disdain, commenting, “There is no American Army as such, as its units are either in training or are amalgamated with the British and the French.”

24. Smythe, _Pershing_, 40; _USAWW_ 14: 303; Fiske refers to the argument of trench warfare instruction versus the open warfare instruction which Pershing sought to implement; _USAWW_ 3: 495.
French instructors did not doubt the willingness of Americans to fight and the gusto of their soldiers but they believed that the spirit of the units was in turn hampered by their lack of efficiency.\(^{25}\)

Many of the Americans were not impressed with the instruction provided by their French and British counterparts. “Our young officers and men are prone to take the tone and tactics of those with whom they are associated, and whatever they are now learning that is false or unsuited for us will be hard to eradicate later,” according to Fiske. Pershing and other American leaders feared that, much like combat on the Western Front, the young officers would stagnate under the tutelage of British and French instructors, for “Our experience with the British had shown that, due to differences in national characteristics and military systems, the instruction and training of our troops by them retarded our progress.” Pershing believed that the British army had grown unable to accomplish a significant breakout because they were conditioned to fear the open ground and hunkered into their trenches afraid to leave their defensive positions. The General compared a British soldier in the open to “the frame of mind of a man caught abroad naked.” A notation on the state of the American training in the United States summed up the general situation eight months after entry into the war. It simply stated, “the state of instruction in the United States is not brilliant.”\(^{26}\)

No matter what American instructors and their European associates thought about each other, their opinions of the new young officers arriving from the U.S. remained consistent. Fiske reported in June 1918, “A large number of [our] officers were found to be absent at British schools, thereby retarding the training of small units.” A memo from the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) echoed this sentiment, noting “The battalion or company commanders were


frequently away on courses, thus missing the great opportunity of gaining practical experience."\(^{27}\)

Many generals noted that there was an obvious understaffing of trained officers. The inability of officers to acclimate to the rigor of military training can be blamed on inexperience. Pershing noted that many junior officers were capable enough but “without experience.” Even the heralded 1\(^{st}\) Division, considered by many Europeans to be the only “battle worthy” unit during the war, began as a division of recruits and “half of the company commanders had less than six months experience.” General Erich von Ludendorff, commander of the German forces late in the war, noted “An army is not made in a few weeks—long training and tradition are required.”\(^{28}\) At least some Europeans did not doubt the fighting abilities of the American soldier and knew that competent officers could not be produced in the limited time available.

Prior to the declaration of war in April 1917, the United States was not prepared for any large scale military activity, which was demonstrated by the inefficiency shown in the creation of prepared young officers.\(^{29}\) The training many of these officers received was haphazardly created and diverse in nature. It was possible for a single unit to study under French instructors prone to emphasize trench raids and the use of the hand grenade, then a British instructor who favored artillery barrages and bayonet charges, and, finally, actually serve under an American commander who ordered that units press forward utilizing open warfare tactics. It was not until near the end of the war that Americans alone trained their officers.

\(^{27}\) USAWW 3: 105 and 213.
\(^{28}\) Pershing, My Experiences, 2: 299; Pershing, My Experiences, 1: 190; Smythe, Pershing, 29; Eisenhower, Yanks, 114; Erich von Ludendorff, Ludendorff’s Own Story, two volumes (New York: Harpers Brother, 1919), 114.
\(^{29}\) Peter J. Schifferle, Anticipating Armageddon: The Leavenworth Schools and U.S. Army Effectiveness 1919-1945 (PhD diss., UMI Microform 3053994), 56.
A report of the conditions of divisions issued on 19 June 1918, demonstrated the training conundrum. “In most of these divisions little attention has been give to training in open warfare, and in this regard younger officers are especially deficient. The training appears to have been carried on in a perfunctory way and without efficient supervision.” One general “praised the soldierly qualities of the men, but said they were very much behind in their training.” This had resulted in a number of untrained or partially-trained officers. Many of the junior officers had received little or poor training prior to arrival in Europe and were accustomed to the tactics taught to them by French or British instructors. This was later countered by impressing upon them the American idea of open warfare. Pershing encouraged the teaching of musketry, battle tactics, rifle care and use, and soldierly discipline. He complained about the training which was being received stateside, with “unfair individual and ruinous efficiency this organization [to] send recruits into battle without adequate training.” He argued that “in a new army like ours, if discipline were lacking, the factor most essential to its efficiency would be missing.”

The tactical question of open warfare versus trench warfare was debated at the highest levels of command. Pershing was a proponent of open warfare and the offense. The European Allied commanders, Marshal Douglas Haig and General Henri Petain, advocated the trench warfare model and a war of attrition. While Pershing sought to form an independent American Army to takeover a portion of the Western Front, French and British leaders pressured the United States to act as a replacement service, supplying casualty-prone infantry units to “plug” into French and British Divisions. In May 1918, the B.E.F., asked that “as many American officers as can be spared are attached to forward areas.” Pershing did succumb to the demands of the

30. USAWW 14: 324; Pershing, My Experiences, 2: 3, 97, 278; Pershing, My Experiences, 1: 10, 152-3.
Allied commanders in the form of the Abbeville agreement, which gave priority to infantry and machine gun troops in exchange for British aid in shipping.\textsuperscript{31}

The Abbeville agreement did not fully change Pershing’s view, for he remained critical of French and British tactics stating, “While the Germans were practicing for open warfare and concentrating their most aggressive personnel in shock divisions the training of the Allies was still limited to trench warfare.” By August 1918, he issued a mandate, stating that “the training of the American Army be done wholly under the direction of American officers.” Americans were soon conducting and supervising almost all of the training of their own units. By placing junior officers and soldiers under the tutelage of experienced American officers, Pershing limited the ability of Allied commanders to pressure him into poor personnel decisions, which they had in the Abbeville agreement, to some extent. Pershing complained, “little attention has been given to training in open warfare, and in this regard younger officers are especially deficient. The training appears to have been carried on in a perfunctory way and without efficient supervision.”\textsuperscript{32} In a letter to the Secretary of War, Pershing complained that “young officers lacked experience in handling their units in the open.” Pershing disliked the influence the European trainers had, and preferred to conduct offensive operations according to a doctrine of open warfare.

Pershing continued to advocate a policy of open warfare, contrary to his European associates. More than anything, Pershing sought to advance forward in battle through aggressive maneuvering and superior rifle technique. Even March noted, “The necessity [is] for greater

\textsuperscript{31} USAWW 3: 98. The Abbeville agreement promised that Americans would increase the number of Infantry and machine gun units brought over. These units would serve in the British line. However, it also required the British to provide additional shipping for the U.S., which was having logistics problems. The U.S. could recall the troops at any time, and by the time of the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne battles, Pershing did exactly that.

\textsuperscript{32} USAWW 12: 25; Pershing, My Experiences, 1: 293; USAWW 3: 165; Odom, After the Trenches, 42; Pershing, My Experiences, 2: 115.
efficiency in the use of the rifle.” Pershing was relating his experiences as an instructor to his command on the Western Front. “My predilection for detailed instruction in minor tactics, growing out of my previous personal supervision of training in both small and large units, led me quickly to discover deficiencies.” Pershing believed that open warfare and the proper training in such a system based in offense improved the “combat efficiency” of soldiers. Pershing believed strongly in aggressive, offensive warfare, to the point that he relieved the commander of the vaunted 1st Division, due in part to a lack of aggressiveness. Major General William Sibert was “not enthusiastic enough about open warfare training; he was too inactive and had let the division decline in efficiency.” Pershing held Sibert responsible for the problems that the 1st Division experienced in training. With little faith in traditional education, Pershing expressed his thoughts about the experiences in the war as, “our officers could learn first hand what part of their teaching they must discard.”

The A.E.F.’s junior officers, ill-prepared to lead the new type of soldier that was becoming the foundation of the modern military, were unable to maintain discipline amongst the enlisted ranks. Maintaining some semblance of discipline was necessary if the American officers hoped to lead their troops successfully against the veteran German force. Marshall wrote in his memoirs, “Once the men had dispersed to seek shelter from hostile fire on a dark night, it was a trying problem for the officers to collect them again and get them back to work.” Marshall later recalled, while under artillery fire, the officers of one battalion were unable to keep their men from scattering into the wind. Marshall, who went on to become one of the greatest generals of

the modern era, pointed out, “the principal difficulty was the lack of understanding by the junior officers of regrouping their units at every opportunity.”

Discipline was a problem among junior officers, as well. To many soldiers in the field, the junior officer leading their company or platoon into battle represented the face of the Army. Officers who were incapable of controlling themselves and the soldiers in their command reflected poorly on the Army, as a whole. Pershing observed, “Prior to signing the Armistice, serious breaches of discipline were rare, considering the number of troops. This was due to the high sense of duty of the soldiers and their appreciation of the seriousness of the situation.” Although leadership at the highest levels suggested that there were few infractions of military law but the courts-martialed proved otherwise. Junior officers bore the brunt of legal action. At the end of the war more first lieutenants were court-martialed than any other single officer group. Two hundred and fifty lieutenants were tried in 1918 alone.

Poor training had caused junior officers to ignore their own needs in the field. They often pushed themselves and their troops into the line to attack until they were casualties or simply too exhausted to perform. Rather than maintaining tactical discipline and rotating fresh soldiers in, the junior officers pushed their exhausted men into the teeth of the German defensive works. Such officers also represented the largest portion of leaders tried for courts-martial. Officers of the rank of 1st and 2nd lieutenant comprised the vast majority of the 1,948 courts-martials in 1919. A total of 1,461 of these were lieutenants in rank. Captains represented an additional 387 cases.

34. Eisenhower, Yanks, 188; Marshall, Memoirs, 33, 90, and 167.
Marshall reported that many officers, when they learned of the slow progress of the war during the winter of 1917, were openly depressed at the “disheartening news.” The composure of an officer in front of his soldiers must be maintained, if only for morale’s sake. An example of the inability of an officer to lead his soldiers was demonstrated in a letter from Lieutenant Robert W. Kean. Kean wrote, “In the regiment we had a lieutenant who was rather a loud-mouthed talker and always boasting what he would do when he got to the front. But when he did get there he became very nervous and was useless as an officer, transmitting his nervousness to the enlisted men.” This officer was later court-martialed for his inability to maintain his own discipline.

Junior officers and their enlisted soldiers suffered tremendous casualties. One captain, leading an attack against German machine gunners, took his objective but lost all of his junior officers in the process. This was not uncommon, for junior officers in infantry companies suffered casualty rates from 33 to 100 percent. Of course, officer casualties were high because they had to move to oversee their units, often presenting themselves to a capable sniper or random artillery burst. John S.D. Eisenhower reported, “Throughout these days the fighting was brutal, and the American units, in common with all troops relatively new to combat, who require a great deal of personal leadership, lost an inordinately high proportion of its officers.”

Although junior officers demanded progress on the battlefield, they often died while giving commands. A young medical officer reported that the unit he was attached to had “unquestionably been severely handled.” The 2nd Division, by June 1918, had suffered some 9,000 casualties. The Division had a total strength of seventeen thousand, and had suffered a

39. Harries, The Last Days of Innocence, 244 and 255; Eisenhower, Yanks, 169. Evan Andrew Huelfer thoroughly analyzes the impact of casualties in The “Casualty” Issue.
casualty rate of over 50 percent. But both German and allied witnesses remarked at the doughboys’ aggressiveness, bravery, and willingness to take casualties. Although the officers were often incapable of leading, the enlisted men fought on. One report noted, “In one instance a battalion, a major’s command, was being commanded by a sergeant—and commanded well.” Sergeants and corporals stood at the front of companies and platoons and led by sheer willpower. When, at times, divisions received low casualties they were inserted in different areas to fight again. Pershing used the same soldiers at St. Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne in 1918, introducing them to intense battle after intense battle.\footnote{40}

Both German and American leaders had reached similar conclusions about American junior officers’ effectiveness. German commander Ludendorff reported in his memoirs that at Chateau-Thierry, American soldiers “were unskillfully led, attacked in dense masses, and failed.” The tactical mistakes of the junior officers were numerous. Junior officers pushed the men in dense packs, crowded them at the front, assaulted the same objective over again, and suffered for it. Officers simply made foolish errors. Lieutenant Maury Maverick reported that “Just before the attack, up and down the lines you could hear the American lieutenants yelling ‘God damn it, don’t you know we’re going over the top at 5:35?’” Marshall believed that the lack of training made it difficult to properly organize an operation, as Maverick demonstrated. Even Ludendorff felt that individually American soldiers were capable but unable to perform as a unit, a direct result of failed junior officer leadership.\footnote{41}

Major General James Harbord found that junior officers were “overwhelmed by the force of the attack.” One officer ordered an artillery barrage after he retreated from an Allied-
occupied town. He had failed to retake his position in the face of a German offensive. The junior officer reported that he had been overrun and stunned by a hand grenade. Harbord found the story the officer told to be preposterous, noting no marks on him and that the rest of his unit had taken no casualties. Harbord proposed that the cause was the “inefficiency of officers.”

Not only had the officer performed poorly but his unit had been unable to take its objective despite repeated attempts. Another example of poor performance was presented in Marshall’s memoirs. An engineer officer, Lieutenant Oliver Kendall, before a scheduled attack, set out with a working party in the middle of the night and lost his way. Another officer discovered that Kendall had become lost and, while pressing ahead in the dark to discover their relative position, he and the sergeant fell directly into an enemy trench amidst a German unit. The officer and sergeant managed to lead their party out of the enemy trenches without suffering any casualties. However, Kendall had disappeared, and with him the dispatch cases revealing allied trench locations and battle plans. In another case, a lieutenant crossing No Man’s Land under fire noticed he was no longer with his platoon. “Where the hell is my platoon?” he asked the remaining six men. At that point he decided to turn back. But his sergeant kept going, noting “Nobody ever got in trouble for going toward the enemy.”

On 20 April 1918, 1,200 Germans, led by “Hindenburg’s Traveling Circus,” attacked the American lines near the village of Seicheprey. The Americans, under the command of National Guard Major General Clarence R. Edwards, were operating under French directives. A counterattack was ordered which was unorganized and unsuccessful. “The officer immediately responsible for directing the counter-attack called off the operation on his own initiative.” He was court-martialed for his failure. The German reports regarding the Seicheprey raid stated,

42. Harries, *The Last Days of Innocence*; 266-9; Asprey, *In Belleau Wood*, 268.
44. Hallas, *Doughboy War*, 90.
“the men were better than their officers,” and complimented the abilities of the soldiers. One report stated “the American leadership in the combat up to now has been found wanting.” A similar raid against the 1st Division bore strikingly similar results with the Germans, in victory, commending the American soldiers’ close quarter fighting ability.\(^{45}\)

Lack of discipline adversely impacted the morale of enlisted men. General Robert Bullard, Pershing’s Chief of Staff, placed the responsibility of maintaining discipline within the unit on the commanding officer and his training, which he declared “far from uniform.” In a General Order issued by Pershing, the Commander in Chief demanded “determination, patriotism, loyalty and efficiency.” The repercussion for “inefficiency or delinquency” would be the dismissal of the offending officer. The belief was that many of the “unnecessary or avoidable losses” during the war were a result of a “lack of discipline.” A memo circulated at the General Headquarters of the A.E.F. noted a “failure on the part of the officers to look for and sometimes to correct errors of tactics and discipline.” Inspectors from the Adjutant General and Inspector General were forced to correct errors of officers and explained the handling of men. Pershing noted that “it is never difficult to discover the attitude of a commander, as it is almost certain to be reflected in his unit.”\(^{46}\)

The morale of the soldier was the primary focus when considering discipline in the trenches. Junior officers were taught that they needed to maintain a close relationship with the men under their command. Unfortunately, many officers failed to understand the difference between the professional soldier and the citizen soldier, seeking to use the same motivation for both. A letter written in the winter of 1917 suggested that any officer “who can keep his men’s

\(^{45}\) Asprey, \textit{In Belleau Wood}, 239-40; \textit{USA WW} 11:297 (19 May 1918); Trask, \textit{The AEF}, 59; Smythe, \textit{Pershing}, 59 and 111.

\(^{46}\) Eisenhower, \textit{Yanks}, 206; \textit{USA WW} 16: 69; \textit{USA WW} 15: 303-4; \textit{USA WW} 3: 684; Pershing, \textit{My Experiences}, 2: 272.
socks and shoes greased and dry and his horses groomed and picket lines above the flood of water and mud—he is the greatest contributor to our success in this war.” Marshall wrote, “The officers labored to reduce the discomforts and hardships of their men,” but doing so was beyond the young officers’ capabilities. However, one inspection revealed that many were not concerned with the soldiers’ health. The report stated, “Officers not sufficiently instructed and zealous in providing health and comfort of men.”

Pershing sought to solve such issues by creating morale officers. These individuals were designed to create “effective stimulation” of troops. Their focus was “the entire subject of morale and to furnish the service with ideas which, in practical experience, have been found to be of value in maintaining the desired discipline and spirit.” The focus on morale was designed to improve efficiency; however, the position was not created until October 1918. Morale was such a concern for Pershing that after the war the *Field Service Regulations of 1923 (F.S.R. 1923)* reflected his beliefs. “Infantry fighting power rests upon the basis of morale,” stated the *F.S.R. 1923.*

 Officers had other concerns closely related to morale. Young officers needed to attend to the supplying of troops both in food and in goods. Supplying an army across the ocean was a difficult task. Supplies went out to the divisions but poorly trained regimental supply officers were unable to deliver the food and ammunition to the front lines in a timely fashion. During training, the officers were warned to look to the supply of food for their soldiers, for men were difficult to motivate on an empty stomach. However, the officers at the front found themselves


incapable of distributing the supplies, as it “proved beyond the capacity of the inexperienced U.S. officers.”49

Another concern was the physical conditioning of both the officers and soldiers. Pershing and others at General Headquarters believed that too many officers were unable to properly perform their duties because of their fitness levels, for “it had become apparent to all of us that physical fitness was an essential qualification of a man’s ability to perform any military duty.” Not only did sports provide a fitness level but the activities served to boost morale and create a more efficient military. Much like the morale officers, the General Staff saw fit to commission civilian athletic directors to supervise and organize events, for “mass athletics, boxing, hand-to-hand fighting, and calisthenics proved so valuable.” Pershing ordered “prompt elimination of unfits should follow, which demonstrated the value of exercise to the General.”50

The training junior officers received seemed lacking even to many of the junior officers themselves. Maverick wrote, “Most of us who were young American officers knew little of actual warfare—we had the daring but not the training.” Maverick, when he found himself in charge of his battalion’s ammunition train, confessed that he had “little idea of what he was supposed to do.” Maverick was not alone in this assessment. Kean also believed that platoon leaders were “lost” in their understanding of the tactics and necessaries of being an officer. Kean reported that they “did not know exactly what was expected of them.” A memo in the A.E.F.’s General Headquarters circulated in late June 1918, which reinforced Maverick and Kean’s concerns with training. Officers demonstrated “that they had received little more than

elementary training… it is evident that the plans in force in the United States are not producing the desired results.”51

The commanding officers in Europe were also aware of the problems with the training of young officers. Marshall recalled a comment Pershing made in his memoirs; he noted that “we didn’t show any signs of much training.” Baker wrote Pershing, questioning the abilities of the young officers. Baker noted, “Most of these young officers present problems of judgment and foresight.” Pershing saw problems in the training that he blamed on the leadership and training being provided in the United States. He said, “My impressions of the troops inspected on this particular visit were favorable, although quite a number of officers were found unfamiliar with the principles of tactical leadership. In such hastily trained units this was hardly surprising, especially in view of the known defects of the instruction at home.”52

While Pershing knew that many officers were relatively untrained, he was not willing to accept this as an excuse for those unable to accomplish their missions. He “would ignore any excuses for failure, no matter how valid. Obstacles such as…untrained officers…did not impress him.” He appreciated leaders with persistence and aggressiveness like himself. Officers such as General Charles Summerall thrived in the A.E.F. under Pershing’s command. Summerall was not afraid to be aggressive and was rewarded with promotions from Pershing. One example of Summerall’s attitude occurred when a subordinate informed him that his unit had been stopped. To this Summerall replied, “You may have paused for reorganization. If you ever send another message with the word stopped in it, you will be sent to the rear for reclassification.” Pershing

51. Hallas, Doughboy War, 110 and 267; Eisenhower, Yanks, 196; USAWW 3: 105.
believed that a competent officer could get results from poor troops, which was reflected in many of his orders regarding training.\textsuperscript{53} 

Charles L. Bolte, a young reserve second lieutenant and trainer, summed up the abilities of junior officers, simply stating, “It was a case of the blind leading the blind.” Untrained junior officers were training and leading conscripts who relied on them. Reports and inspections of the divisions revealed this problem. “Recent inspections had revealed many deficiencies on the part of our officers, and further confirmed reports regarding the inefficacy [sic] of the training at home,” according to Pershing. An inspection of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Division found that unit officers were unavailable and showed an “absence of initiative, alertness, or activity.”\textsuperscript{54} 

A report confessed that training in the division had “been badly handicapped by the lack of suitable and well trained officers… incompetent officers have been retained in the service.”\textsuperscript{55} War diaries noted that young officers were unprepared to lead companies in the tactics of trench warfare.\textsuperscript{56} Another report revealed the feelings of many:

While sending untrained soldiers into battle is a great evil, there is still a greater evil. This is sending men into battle under untrained officers. Even trained men require leadership and direction of trained officers. In this war, officers and men were alike, neither sufficiently trained nor disciplined to meet the task that confronted them.\textsuperscript{57} 

During the war the A.E.F. suffered proportionally high casualties, compared to the length of time and number of Allied men serving on the Western Front. Over 80,000 deaths occurred during the war with 35,000 men killed in action. Many of the casualties “mounted because replacements, rushed over during the massive summer shipments, were frequently terribly untrained.” Junior officers comprised a large number of these casualties. Marshall, when

\begin{footnotes}
\item[54] Coffman, \textit{The War to End All Wars}, 57; Pershing, \textit{My Experiences} 1: 265; USAWW 3: 600.
\item[55] USAWW 3: 226.
\item[56] Bland, \textit{The Papers of George Catlett Marshall}, 128.
\item[57] USAWW 15: 305.
\end{footnotes}
shipping out to France, reported that several of the lieutenants he travelled with were eventually killed. Of the nine he crossed with on the ferry to New York, “I never learned of the career of two of these officers, but I do know that each of the other seven was killed fighting.” This was not a surprise to the War Department. They expected “a ‘wastage’ of two thousand officers a month when combat began in earnest.” A common report during an offensive would state that officers suffered exceptionally high losses. In one regiment, only four percent of their original officers survived. At the time Brigadier General Douglas MacArthur, son of General Arthur MacArthur and a formidable leader in his own right, recalled the officers he lost. “We left them there, just as they were, gallant men dead in the service of their country.”

A number of officers were also taken prisoner during the war. Of the 82,000 officers serving in the A.E.F. in Europe, 387 were taken from the trenches by the Germans. To replace the losses undertrained men were sent to Europe, for “The demands of incessant battle which had been maintained day by day for more than a month had compelled our divisions to fight to the limit of their capacity.” The resulting casualties brought green replacement officers to the front that were not respected, by their superiors or the soldiers they were suppose to command. One private reported on the replacements, complaining “The new officers began making themselves unpopular as soon as they arrived. They were replacements. Not a front line officer in the lot.”

By this time many of the enlisted soldiers were veterans, and green junior officers, untrained and unprepared, could not efficiently lead them.

58. Pershing, Final Report, 623; As of 1 September 1919—81,141 deaths, 35,556 killed in action, 15,130 died of wounds, and 24,786 died of disease; Smythe, Pershing, 159; Marshall, Memoirs, 8; Asprey, In Belleau Wood, 103; Harbord, The American Army, 333; MacArthur, Reminiscences, 61. Huelfer’s The “Casualty Issue” in American Military Practice focuses on the casualties of the war and their long term impact.

The training junior officers received in courses prior to crossing the Atlantic for France was not up to standard. Major General William Snow argued that the stateside program offered a “wholly inadequate course of instruction.” He, in part, blamed this on “its incompetent instructors.” Pershing thought that many did not receive enough of the correct training. Many inspectors agreed with Pershing, attributing the performance of the officers to improper training. Pershing, for his part, wanted the army to operate in accordance with the education he had received at West Point but such training was absent. As he put it, “The fundamentals so thoroughly taught at West Point for a century were more or less neglected.” Trainers in America sent “green officers and men to fight against trained veterans.”  

Pershing believed that combat defects were the result of a lack of supervision in training in America.

Instructors’ opinions were similar to those of the critics. A report in 1918 from the Inspector General stated, “It has been observed that in many training areas there is a lack of the seriousness and vigor on the part of the instructor that is so necessary, and more over a lack of careful explanation. Mistakes are often passed over without notice.” March believed that training rigor was “dependent upon the officers who are designated to instruct them in camp and lead them in battle.” A bulletin issued in June 1918 complained that the instructors at the schools and camps were improperly screened for competency. All officers and non-commissioned officers required “a good common school education” and the “adaptability to play the role of instructor.”

The United States needed to produce a “supply of officers with some idea of tactics and qualities of leadership.” By August of 1918, this was a problem, for the War Department had shunned drawing upon college students in case of a drawn out affair but they faced a shortage in

60. Coffman, The War to End All Wars, 58; Pershing, Final Report, 561; Zieger, America’s Great War, 105; Pershing, My Experiences, 1: 154; Pershing, My Experiences, 1: 381; Pershing, My Experiences, 2: 176.
61. USAWW 17: 73; March, Annual Report 1919, 299; USAWW 17: 69.
raw material. They could not find replacements remotely qualified to fill the casualties suffered on the frontline. A cable reported, “There is at present a very heavy demand for officer replacements.” In the 1st Division, a majority of the officers going over to France were reserves rather than Regular Army officers. These replacements suffered the same poor training in the later part of the war as in the beginning. Pershing’s final report suggested that A.E.F. forces were “capable of powerful blows, but their blows were apt to be awkward.” The youth and willingness of Americans was unfortunately outweighed by “their lack of training and experience.”

Officers could be punished if deemed unfit for the duty to which they were assigned without being court-martialed. A General Order was issued by the Secretary of War, concerned with the performance of the young officers.

Secretary of War desires officers of Regular Army who have received temporary promotion in National Army and who have proved unable to meet requirements of position to be reported by name. Such promotions have been given solely because of belief that officers could properly perform duties of their position. When officers prove incompetent for this, the policy is to return them to their proper grade.

Individuals that had been promoted would just as easily be demoted within the wartime National Army. Over 1100 officers were “reclassified” in this way. Pershing stated that “a number of officers were found unfit for combat duty.” As such, 270 officers were forced to stand before efficiency boards to be considered for elimination.

Junior officers were also under constant scrutiny because the military had searched the ranks for soldiers to promote. “Particular care was taken to search the ranks for the most promising soldiers, in order to develop leaders for the command of platoons and companies.”

62. Trask, AEF, 18; USAWW 12: 55, 146, and 265; Palmer, America, 28; Pershing, Final Report, 625; Pershing, My Experiences, 2: 157.
63. USAWW 16: 101. G.O. 54
64. Pershing, Final Report, 617.
Higher grade positions, which in other eras of conflict were filled with inexperienced appointments, were filled with officers promoted from within the ranks. Pershing’s organization in France was focused on the recruitment of officers, “the policy of G-1 in conjunction with G-5 was to feed at the bottom a constant supply of junior company officers who, upon demonstrated efficiency for promotion, should be advanced in grade.”65

Just three months prior to the war’s end, training still failed to meet standards. Instructors in the later camps were graduates of earlier camps, but often had only four to six months of total training and experience. Marshall was only one of the many officers who abhorred the level of unpreparedness of the United States. He recalled that the young officers who lacked training “paid with their lives and their limbs for the bullheaded obstinacy with which our people had opposed any rational system of training in time of peace.”66

In the crucible of fire that was the World War I, American junior officers entered into a situation for which they were unprepared. Many inexperienced and poorly trained officers were incapable of leading green citizen-soldiers into battle against a determined foe. The discipline, morale, and tactical leadership of the officers proved as green as the troops they were to lead, often failing to measure up to the demands of the Western Front. As the forces began to return home from Europe, Army leaders questioned the performance of captains and lieutenants concerned over America’s ability to survive an extended conflict such as the one experienced in Europe. This situation prompted a series of reforms both at the national level and in the schooling of pre-commissionees. For leaders such as Pershing and others, America might not survive another war fought by inept junior officers.

65. USAWW 12: 21, 146, and 268.