Voiceover: This program is sponsored by the United States World War One Centennial Commission.

(Theme music)

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.

Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.

Clarke: Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* with a discussion by historian Dr. Mitchell Yockelson about his book *Forty-Seven Days: How Pershing's Warriors Came of Age to Defeat the German Army in World War I*. I'm your host Ken Clarke, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago, and it's sponsored by the United States World War One Centennial Commission. This program and more than four hundred others covering a full range of military topics is available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. The Battle of the Meuse Argonne stands as the deadliest clash in American history, when more than a million untested American soldiers went up against a better trained and experienced German army and suffered more than 125,000 casualties, including 26,000 deaths. Yet as Yockelson details in his gripping account, Americans pushed back the enemy in forty-seven days of intense combat, effectively ending a three-year stalemate and bringing the First World War to an end. Told from the perspective of American Expeditionary Forces commanding general John Blackjack Pershing, who personally formed and took command of the army in 1918 and General Hunter Liggett, who would also command the First Army, *Forty-Seven Days* features some of the greatest personalities of the 20th century, including America's original fighter ace Eddie Rickenbacker, Medal of Honor Recipient Alvin York, future president Harry Truman, and military legends George Patton and Douglas MacArthur.

Dr. Yockelson is an investigative archivist at the National Records and Archives Administration and a professor of military history at Norwich University. A recipient of the Army Historical Foundation's Distinguished Writing Award, he has taught previously at the US Naval Academy and now lectures internationally as one of America's foremost experts on the First World War. He is the author of *Borrowed Soldiers: Americans Under British Command, 1918*, and has served as a consultant to the History Channel, PBS, and the Pentagon Channel. Please join me in welcoming to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Professor Mitchell Yockelson.

(Applause)

Yockelson: Thank you, Ken.

Clarke: Thank you so much for being here.

Yockelson: Great. Thank you. Thank you very much. It's a true honor to be here. For military historians to be able to speak at the Pritzker Library and Museum, well, it's like a rock band performing at Madison Square Garden or a stadium. I mean, this is just amazing, and I want to thank the Pritzker for inviting me. Certainly thank the US World War One Centennial Commission for sponsoring it. And this is my passion, WWI, and this is the time to really talk about this subject. And after I wrote the book, a number of people have come up to me, and they said, "Well, how did you come up with this topic? Why write on the Meuse Argonne, this battle? Why write on General Pershing?" And I had to think about it. And as I was starting to prepare talks to promote the book, I started thinking about, really, where did this idea come from? Because I was so involved in researching and writing the book, it just--it sort of seemed natural to me. And then all of a sudden it really occurred to me. And it really, it kind of subconsciously started when I was a young boy. And this photo, yeah that is me back in the day, and a lot more handsome, less gray hair. But at a young age my mom would take me to my pediatrician
outside of Washington D.C. in a suburb called Silver Spring, Maryland. And I was fine, but I'd have to go visit the pediatrician. And we'd drive, and I would see this Pershing Drive. And I'd look at this sign, and I'd start getting this knot in my stomach. I started getting nervous going to see the doctor who, when I got to see him was a nice guy, and he would give me those artificially flavored lollipops just to kind of ease my mind. But I always recognized this name Pershing, and I had no idea who he was of course at that age. And then as I started to become an avid reader and get into history, I remember reading scholastic books about WWI and seeing this name Pershing more and more. And then when I started working at the National Archives, for a number of years I was the specialist in WWI records. So I got to know General Pershing on at least a historical level, and I got to understand him, and I started reading biographies of him. And it all started coming back to a battle that happened between the Meuse River and the Argonne Forest in northern France. And I had no idea as I started doing the research. I had visited the site a number of times, and I try to go back there as often as possible, but I didn't really understand the battle. And 'til I started researching and realizing this ultimately was General Pershing's battle. But I had to figure out who was General Pershing, and what was his role during the war--the Great War, the War to end all wars, WWI. What did he have to do with this conflict, and why was this street in Silver Spring, Maryland named for him? And then I learned that there's tons of parks, public buildings, and so forth that are named for Pershing. Plus almost every city has something named for the Meuse Argonne, whether it's Meuse Argonne street, whether it's Argonne Street, Argonne laboratories near here, for example, is named for the forest outside of there, which was named for the Argonne. So all of this was started to make sense, but it all started coming back to General Pershing. In the event that maybe you haven't read the book yet, or you don't know a whole lot about General Pershing, let me tell you a little bit about him and why he is such an important figure in American military history, and then we'll--when we wrap up the talk perhaps we'll discuss why he's somewhat forgotten today. So he's born in 1860, right on the eve of the American Civil War. He's born in a little town outside of Kansas City, Missouri--about an hour and a half drive--in Laclede, Missouri. And he gets his first attention to warfare during the war when guerillas come through the town. They tear up little Laclede. His dad owns a general store. Some of the guerillas go in there, and they rough up the store, put the fear of God into young John Pershing, and he gets this thought about what warfare is, but he never had an interest in serving in the military. He was more interested in being a teacher and also getting into the profession of law. But one day his sister is reading the local Laclede newspaper, and she sees that the US military academy in West Point, New York—they're gonna have the entrance exam. They go around the country, and you can take the exam. And like a lot of people, he gets the idea of, okay, there's potential for a free education. So I'll take the exam, I'll go in. if I pass it, I'll go into military academy, I'll do my time, and maybe this will lead to becoming an attorney and also a teacher. So he passes the exam. He goes to West Point. He doesn't excel as far as academics go. He does okay. But where he does excel is, that's in leadership. And his classmates there at West Point, they recognize this, and they see that John Pershing is gonna be somebody great. And he's still hesitant about the military. He passes through West Point, and he gets commissioned, and he heads out west, and it's still the frontier. The frontier hasn't closed yet, and we're still fighting the Native Americans. He becomes a cavalry officer, just like many graduates of West Point at that time, and he leads a company of African American troops, part of the black cavalry--the 10th US Cavalry. They were one of four cavalry regiments that were part of the regular army formed after the Civil War. And so he leads them in a frontier. And then afterwards he's still got this idea about teaching. He goes and teaches at the University of Nebraska, teaches what we would think of today
as like an ROTC program. And he's okay as a teacher. Those who were his students said he kind of spoke in a monotone, kind of boring, so forth. But he was kind of testing his ground at that point. And he also started taking law classes, and eventually got his law degree as well. But he stayed in the army. He was a little bit fearful, well, if I leave the army am I gonna be able to get a job as an attorney or a teacher? So he still continued on the military, and the Spanish American War breaks out. He heads down to Cuba, and again he's commanding troops in the 10th Cavalry. He's a quartermaster officer, and he does quite well in the attacks on the San Juan heights. And it gives him a level of experience. He goes back and teaches at West Point during this period. And again he's not a good teacher. The cadets make fun of him behind his back, and they come up with a nickname because of his commanding the African American troops. They call him--well they call him the N-word, the stronger word, but it's softened to Blackjack, and that moniker sticks with him for the rest of his life. But he goes back, and he's in the regular army, and where he really gains his experience is, he's in the Philippines. And it's after the Spanish American war. The US takes over the Philippines. The Filipino people are not real excited about having the Americans there. And after all they had just gotten rid of the Spanish. You know, hundreds of years of Spanish rule, and here are the Americans that are coming in and taking over. But Pershing does an exceptional job of getting the Filipino people to understand the Americans, and in a sense tame them, especially the moros who were Muslims. And this builds his experience which later on would help him during the first world war, because not only is he a commander and a leader, but he also has to be a diplomat, and that's a significant part of his job during WWI. So he's there in the Philippines. He comes back to the United States, gets posted in the Washington area, and he meets a young woman by the name of Frances Warren. And he falls head over heels in love with her. They build a relationship, and they get married. It so turns out that her father was a high ranking senator from Wyoming and who led the congressional military affairs, and all of a sudden Pershing jumps from a line officer to becoming a brigadier general. In fact he jumps over a number of other officers. And the newspapers in Washington jump all over this and start saying, "Well, Pershing got this promotion because of nepotism, because of his father in law." Theodore Roosevelt was the president at that time. Roosevelt denies this, and I think that's absolutely true as far as what Roosevelt said. Pershing had the experience; he had the leadership. He had also gone to Japan and observed the Russo Japanese War, so he understood the military, but more importantly, again going back to this theme, he understood other countries. He understood other leaders, and that's what the army needed in somebody in his position. So he and Frankie, as he called her--they build a family. And they're eventually posted in San Francisco, at the Presidio. This is the house that they lived in. so we're jumping ahead now to 1915. And Pershing's assigned to the Mexican border in Texas in El Paso, because things are heating up on the Mexican border, a Mexican revolution is going on, and there's lots of trouble going between the Mexicans and the Americans, especially the Americans living in Mexico. And Pershing's down there. And Frankie--at this point there's three children here. They have four children at this point. And she's to join him in August of that year. So one day he's at the camp, and he's walking around, and the telephone rings, and his orderly's not there, and the phone's ringing off the hook. Finally, Pershing, frustrated, picks up the phone, answers it, and there's a voice on the other end of the line, and Pershing says, "What do you want?" And this person says, "I'm calling to verify the fire at the Pershing home." And there's silence on the other end. And the caller, who turns out to be a reporter for a New York newspaper, didn't know this was General Pershing on the end. Pershing barks back, "What fire?" The reporter recognizes that's Pershing's voice and who he's speaking to, gets very nervous. Pershing calms him down--amazing
that he's got his own calm demeanor, and says, "Tell me what happened." The night before there had been some renovation in the house, and a fire had broken out. Not only did Frankie and the four children live there, but there was another family with some children. They got out of the house, and it was thought that that was the Pershing family that got out. Unfortunately that wasn't the case. Frankie and three of the four children--the three daughters--were killed in the fire. Only Warren, the youngest son, survived and made it out of the home. So here is Pershing learning about this tragedy for the first time, and he's got to deal with it. He of course heads up to San Francisco. He's got to identify the remains, take care of burial, bring the bodies to Wyoming where they are buried, but also figure out how he's gonna take care of his son. And the questions of whether or not he's even gonna continue in the military. At this point, really the military is his whole life. From what I've read on the accounts, Frankie really had drawn him out of--basically he was an introverted individual, didn't do a whole lot--it was really her that brought him into having friends, playing cards, playing polo and so forth. He's gonna have to figure out how to deal with all of this on his own. The army gives him some time away from his post, but he comes back. Jumping into 1916 in March, Pancho Villa, a bandit, raids Columbus, New Mexico, and this sets off what could potentially be a war between the US and New Mexico. President Woodrow Wilson is hand his force 'cause he kept switching off between who he was supporting during the Mexican Revolution, and he orders secretary of war Newton Baker, who was newly on the job, to form a punitive expedition. They are thinking about who can lead this expedition, and Pershing's name comes up for two reason--one, going back to his experience in the Philippines and in dealing with foreign dignitaries, foreign leaders, but also the fact that Pershing needed something on his mind to get him through this crisis, and he leads the punitive expedition. They head down there in March. They go after Pancho Villa. They never actually capture him. They wound him. His vaistas, as they were called--a number of them are killed or captured. The Americans get into a few minor battles, take some casualties. The Mexican government's not real thrilled about having the Americans there. They don't support him. Intelligence is really weak. But ultimately this becomes a training ground for the future, because now we're into 1917, and the war in Europe had been raging for three years. The British and French allied together were taking horrific casualties. You've heard about the Battle of the Somme, and starting on July 1, 1916, where more than 60,000 British soldiers are killed and wounded in one day. Battles at Passchendaele, three of them--horrific loses. Battle of Verdun--horrific losses for the French who were being basically bled white. The question is, is the United States gonna enter this war. And eventually that happens. There's a number of reasons, but the US enters the war April 6. Wilson goes before congress, he asks for a declaration of war, and he gets that within a couple of days. So now the US is in the war. The big problem is, though, we don't have much of a military force. We have the regular troops, some of whom had fought down in Mexico with Pershing. But you also had the National Guardsmen, who are along the Mexican border between Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. They weren't allowed to go into Mexico. Pershing didn't have a really good feeling about the National Guardsmen. He felt like they were weekend warriors, not the best troops, so he had them basically training along the border and learning to be soldiers. But Wilson called them up, federalized the National Guard. So what you had were roughly 127,000 regular troops--the professional soldiers--another 110,000 National Guardsmen. And then you had those that were gonna enlist, but also Wilson instituted conscription. He's gonna have a draft--the first time since the Civil War. Eventually more than two million soldiers would sign up for the draft. Obviously not all of them made it into the military, but that becomes the bulk of the soldiers. So the army, which will ultimately become the American Expeditionary Forces, is made up of these
regular troops, the National Guardsmen, and then the drafted troops, which were called the National Army. They start training in camps in the United States, mostly in the South, the southeast—the warmer climates. British and French soldiers who had experience on the Somme and Passchendaele and Vermont—excuse, in Verdun, come over, and they help train the American soldiers and teach them a modern warfare. The US was used to fighting on the frontier. They had fought in Cuba. They had fought in the Philippines, but they had no idea what it was gonna be like for a type of warfare using airplanes, long-range artillery, machine guns, and a new introduction to warfare in 1915, chemical warfare. Gas—phosgene and mustard gas. So all of this had to be taught to the American troops. And it was gonna take a while before the Americans were gonna be able to actually go over and fight on the so-called Western Front in—mostly in France, in Belgium. The troops had to be trained, so the British and the French started sending representatives to the US trying to lobby President Wilson to get American troops over early, saying, "If you bring them over and you can amalgamate them in with our forces, we can win this war early." Wilson absolutely forbade that. He was thinking along the lines of, okay, this war is gonna be over at some point, and the United States is gonna be at the peace table. The United States needs to have a say at that peace table, and the only way they're gonna have a say is if the US had fought as an independent military. So he gives Pershing his instructions. "You will go overseas, you will play nicely with the other Allied leaders, but you are gonna fight independently." And that worked out for the most part. Problem also is, we, being the American army, didn't have the transportation, so we had to rely on the British to bring over troops, plus we needed to train. And so, early on as American troops started coming over, they trained under the British and French before Pershing could eventually form them together into a tactical fighting force. The guy that he's got to deal with the most is Ferdinand Foch. Foch had been a French army officer for many years. Great general, a wonderful administrator. But he had an agenda, and that agenda was to get the war over early. So after Pershing comes to France—and this is in June of 1917—slowly American troops start coming over, and Pershing's building the nucleus of the American Expeditionary Forces, the AEF. He's meeting with Foch on a regular basis, and Foch is pushing him hard for American troops to become part of the Allied Army, especially the French. Pershing has more grandiose ideas. He's gonna take this slowly. He's gonna take his own time, bring over the American troops, and he wants to form them together into one large tactical unit that he'll call American First Army, and they will fight in their own sector in France in an area that he's willing to negotiate with the French, but it's going to be something—a ground that he chooses. And he and Foch go back and forth over this well into 1918, and they have their own battle. They meet frequently. There were shouting matches. They almost went to fisticuffs. But Pershing held his own, and he said, "Look,"—he pulled out maps that he said, "This is where I believe the Americans should fight." They had established their own sector in the Lorraine area. And one of the areas was the small town of St. Mihiel, about twenty-something miles from Verdun. It had been taken over by the Germans early in the war—in fact September of 1914, just within a couple of months. And the Germans had built a bulge, or they called it a Salient. And they had observation over that area. They were able to bridge supplies into the rest of the Western Front. And Pershing felt they had to be driven from that area. But even more, this further north of St. Mihiel, was the Meuse River and the Argonne Forest, where the Germans had built their famous Hindenburg line, a strong defensive system with concrete bunkers and ravines and barbed wire and these defensive structures that the French had been unable to break. And that was gonna be, in Pershing's mind—and Foch agreed with him—that was gonna be the key to breaking the Western Front. Pershing wanted to attack both of them. And he and Foch again went at this. And Foch wanted Pershing along with the French army to attack the
Meuse Argonne front. Pershing told him, "No, we’re gonna fight as an independent army under my own First Army." So in August of 1918 Foch allows Pershing to form this tactical unit called First Army. It was gonna be made up of the highest level, or corps, and underneath the corps are divisions. And for the Americans a division was over 27,000 officers and men. That was twice the size of other Allied divisions, including German divisions. Huge tactical units. Most officers in the AEF had--the only experience they had was similar to Pershing, fighting in Cuba and also in the Philippines. And to be able to command this level of men was extremely difficult. The American battles up until the St. Mihiel and Meuse Argonne at Cantigny, where the First Division fought. There was also along the Marne at Belleau Wood and Chateau Tierney. So the Americans basically had undertaken their baptism by fire, but to be able to attack these areas was gonna be a huge undertaking. At first Foch wanted Pershing to abandon the St. Mihiel attack, but Pershing felt it was important, 'cause this was gonna be the first time that the US would fight independently on their own, and it was gonna be their own First Army. So Foch allowed this. The attack was to take place on September 12th of 1918. The attack went off early in the morning. If you’ve ever been to northern France in autumn, you know that it’s chilly and it's rainy, and that's exactly what it was like at that time: a chilly rain. The Americans attack the positions along the St. Mihiel salient. The Germans had some inklingsg that the Americans were there and in fact had called for a withdrawal, but it was a slow withdrawal. And so the Americans caught them blindly, but the Germans didn’t give up. It was a fierce battle, but within the first day the Americans had conquered the Germans. They had driven them off the Salient. It took another two days before the Germans were completely gone. And a French citizens who had been basically held captive by the Germans since 1914 were finally coming out of cellars that they were living in, abandoned property, and were able to come back to their homes, albeit most of those homes had been destroyed by years of shellfire and German occupation. But it was a great day for the Americans. Newspapers in the United States celebrated this with headlines. On September 13th, Pershing celebrated his fifty-eight birthday, and it was a great experience. But they had to basically quell this celebration because the larger attack, which was gonna take place on a front thirty-five miles long, was in the Meuse Argonne area, and they quickly had to get troops from the St. Mihiel area over to the Meuse Argonne without the Germans knowing what the Americans were gonna be up against. And so immediately after St. Mihiel, the plans were put into place to bring the troops to the Meuse Argonne. Pershing established his headquarters in a little village called Souilly, in the mayor's office, which had been used by the French troops during the Battle of Verdun, and this is where he would work with his staff to conduct the battle. And one important fact that I haven mentioned to you is, Pershing decided that the wanted to be the commander also of First Army. So he was wearing two hats. Not only was he commanding the American expeditionary forces, which included pretty much all over Europe, but this tactical unit of first army, which was now numbering over 5,000 troops in the middle of September and growing. Pershing got around, like a lot of officers, on a railcar. He had a specially designed railcar that would get him from various fronts, various parts of the front. For example, in Chaumont, which is closer to the Marne--that's where he had his main headquarters. He would take this train, and it would hide in a--like a glen in an area of trees. The gentleman in the photograph to the far right with the mustache and the Sam Browne belt, that's Colonel Earl Thornton. You might know of the Palmer House hotel down the street. He worked there before the war. So he had special experience in running Pershing's train. The African Americans, as you can see in the photograph, many of them were Pullman porters before the war. One of the unsung heroes of WWI is a name that's most familiar with WWII and the post-WWII period, the rebuilding of Europe, and that's George C. Marshall. He started out as an
operations officer in first division, was the architect behind the battle of Cantigny in late June of nineteen—I'm sorry, late May of 1918, and he was brought over onto Pershing's staff, and then Pershing brought him over to First Army and made him an operations officer. He was the guy that was charged not only with organizing the St. Mihiel battle, but also moving the troops to the Meuse Argonne front. And he was known to stand in the streets in front of the mayor's office at Souilly and yelling directions to the troops getting them forward. Most of this was done at night to mask the movements so the Germans couldn’t see this. The troops were mainly brought forward in trucks, many of them by Indochinese drivers who were a part of the French. And the accounts of the troops going, and they’re driving along these roads that are shell-pocked. And again getting in the night, and it's raining all the time. Not a real pleasant experience, as most of them would write. Another of the unsung heroes that’s well-worth mentioning were the telephone operators, also known as Hello Girls. What happens is, when Pershing gets over to France, and he establishes his headquarters, he needs to communicate with other elements of his army throughout the front. And the French provided most of the resources to the Americans. They provided most of the guns. They provided all of the airplanes. They provided all of the artillery plus a number of other supplies, and they also provided telephone operators. Many of them, of course they spoke French, but they didn’t speak English very well, and there was lots of confusion. Pershing, recognizing that this was gonna be an issue as long as the Americans are over there, calls back to Washington, speaks to the chief of staff Peyton March, and says, "We need American telephone operators. We need them quickly." Decided that they were gonna be women, and so there were advertisements placed in newspapers all across the United States, particularly with the Bell Companies, and they were looking for women who not only could speak French fluently, but also could handle the pressure of being towards the front lines, pressure of having telephone switchboards that are constantly moving, and calls coming in. And so they had to take exams, and once they passed the exams they had to take more exams, and they would come over to France, and they were dispersed. The image that I'm showing you here are the French--are the Hello Girls that are at Souilly. You can see on the back of their chairs are the army issued helmets and gasmasks, showing how close they were to the front and the danger that they were under. Because of the weather, the air service was gonna have to play a significant role, but also was hindered significantly. During St. Mihiel, the largest contingent of airplanes was used during the war--over a thousand. Despite the fact of the rain, a number of them were able to get up. Most of them were observation planes where they could spot where the enemy artillery was, enemy troop movements, and so forth. But also this was one of the first time that bombing was used. Day bombing, and they also tired night bombing. Not entirely accurate. You didn’t have the--you know, the radar systems that we had in WWII, so they were only marginally effective. During the Meuse Argonne, the air service had a heck of a time, mostly because of the weather. It was cloudy, rainy. It was hard to get the planes up, but still it became an important component, largely because of the guy in the upper corner, William Mitchell--Billy Mitchell, as he was known. He would lead the air service. He was a constant figure around the headquarters of Souilly. Constantly badgering Pershing about the air service and making it an important component. If you know anything about Billy Mitchell, he continued down the same road after the war to a point where he ended up getting court martialed and booted out of the military. Underneath him is Eddie Rickenbacker, who becomes the American ace. Twenty-six victories at his hand for shooting down German aircraft. Next to him is somebody that you probably don’t recognize, but you’ve seen a movie that he’s related to, and that's Merian C. Cooper. He was a pilot in the air service. He’s shot down on the second day of the Meuse Argonne attack, and after the war he joins the Polish Air
Service, and then he gets into the film business, and he's the director of *King Kong*. He also becomes a famous cinematographer in Hollywood. Above him is a guy named Frank Luke. He was a balloon buster. Balloon sausages, as they were also called, that the Germans used, and Luke had--by the time he was killed, also on the second day of the battle, he had shot down eighteen of them. There's a good reason to think that had the war--had he continued in the war, he would have been the true ace of the war. The battle has taken place on September 26. More than a thousand guns are firing early in the morning. The Americans make initial gates, and then they become bogged down. Part of the reason is traffic congestion. I drove through the streets of Chicago yesterday and saw how horrible traffic is here, but back in France in 1918 you have three roads leading to the front, most of them shell-pocked. Also you've got, as I mentioned, divisions with over 26,000 men, and the congestion built up. Supplies are not getting to the front, water's not getting to the front, and the wounded are not getting back to the rear to be taken care of. So they use animals--mules, horses, anything that they could find to get supplies forward. Slowly the battle starts to progress. The Americans take Montfaucon, a high ground, where the Germans are overlooking the Meuse Valley, which had prevented earlier French troops from progressing. Wounded doughboys are taken care of in field hospitals. They're getting gassed. They're getting shot by machine guns, artillery fire. And this is a type of warfare Americans hadn't seen before. Those that are severely wounded are taken well to the rear and to general hospitals. The care that they received was significant. The best doctors in the United States were brought over to France to work with the army, and that including nurses who were almost all volunteers, including the Cromwell sisters, Gladys and Dorothea. They were wealthy New Yorkers who wanted to do their part during the war, and they served at the Meuse Argonne front. And what they witness of the young men who had been mutilated by shell and machine gun fire, but also gassed, hit them really hard. In fact after the armistice when they are on their way home, and they're sailing, they must have made a pact 'cause they went above the ship, went on deck, and they both jumped over into the ocean and committed suicide. Just one of the horrific experiences of the war. The battle starts to slow down within its second week. Pershing almost has a nervous breakdown. He starts to think about the loss of his wife Frankie and the children. He's riding in his staff car one day to the front. His--one of his aids, Quickmire, is in the front seat, and he hears the general scream out, "Frankie, Frankie, oh my God, what have I gotten myself into?" And Pershing has a moment where he looks at the situation, and realizes maybe he made a mistake of also taking over the First Army and the AEF, and he decides to relinquish command of First Army, and he gives it to Lieutenant General Liggett, an experienced corps commander, one of the most brilliant generals of the army. And Liggett has got a lot of issues to deal with. He's got to deal with traffic congestion. And there's the influenza epidemic. Its second phase comes over, and a significant number of the troops in First Army are hindered by that. And it's cold, and it's damp. He's got to get them equipment. He's got to get them supplies to the front. But he organizes this army, he regroups them, and they start the attack during the second week of October. Even though Pershing relinquishes command of First Army, he's still around. That rain I showed you, the mayor's office in Souilly--well, he's got that thing parked by the trees near there, and what we would call today a micromanager. Pershing is still there in Liggett's office, asking him almost every day, "What are you doing?" How are you leading the troops?" So Liggett's got to deal not only the German army that's still well entrenched, but he's got to deal with his boss. Eventually he reorganizes the army, and they move forward. They start to really just push the Germans through--through the valley-- the Meuse Valley, across the Meuse River in the heights, and they make final stand on November 10th. While they're doing this, behind the scenes and armistice is
called, and there's negotiations going on between the Allies and the Germans, that they're gonna have an armistice take place on November 11, in the morning. They finally decided it would be at 11 a.m. Now keep in mind, an armistice is not a surrender. An armistice just says, hey, we're gonna stop the war for this period, and then we're gonna negotiate a surrender. So what happens is the fighting still continues up until 11 a.m. on the 11th. In fact Liggett is brought before congress after the war, and he's asked, "Why did you continue fighting?" And the obvious reason is, we didn't know whether or not the Germans actually were gonna give up at 11 a.m. So there were still significant casualties up to that point, but the war does effectively come to an end on November 11th, and the Germans had been pushed across the river, and they had been soundly defeated. On other parts of the Western Front, the Germans were also being defeated. But it's in this area between the Meuse River and the Argonne Forest where the Americans make their stand, because by November 11th, there's more than 1.2 million Americans fighting, the largest fighting force ever fielded by an American army. And they completely overwhelm the Germans. The period where they were breaking down early in the war, where Pershing had to step down--or at least he decided to step down--the Americans started figuring out how to fight the war, how to fight in this sort of terrain so that the Germans could be defeated. Because without defeating them on this front--who knows--the war could easily have continued into 1919, and the Americans certainly would have been the significant fighting force. But it's hard to say how much longer that war would have gone on. But the Meuse Argonne becomes the symbol of the Americans and the symbol of how the war ends. And after the war, the newspapers really are the ones that kind of remind the American people about the battle. And certain individuals become synonymous with this. For example, George Patton. He is a tank commander. He came over originally as an aid to Pershing. In fact he was one of Pershing's aid during the Mexican punitive expedition. The Americans decide they're gonna have their own tank corps, and so Patton volunteers for it. He becomes a training officer. He ends up leading a tank brigade. On the first day of the battle he's near Cheppy near the front lines. He's shot through the thigh. He's done for the entire war. Douglas MacArthur--one of the true characters in American military history--gets more medals than any other officer during First World War, most of them during the Meuse Argonne. He's leading his troops through the front. He leads a brigade of the 42nd Rainbow Division. In a tough German position called the Cote de Chatillon, an area of high ground that's heavily barb wired and heavily machine-gunned--a number of machine gun nests. Takes them three days, but they break though there. And then Harry S. Truman, who was also near Cheppy where Patton was. He leads an artillery battery from the 35th, the Missouri Division--Missouri Kansas Division. And he cuts his teeth, which would help him in his political career. But also there are other unsung heroes of the battle that don't get noticed until much later on, 'cause they didn't go into politics. They didn't continue long careers in the military. For example, there's Sam Woodfill from the 5th Division. Here he is wearing his medals. He leads on his own a small company in an area called Cune1, a small village that's heavily fortified. Ends up taking out the Germans on his own, and he eventually is awarded the Medal of Honor. You've got Charles Whittlesey who commands what is called the Lost Battalion. It's not really a battalion, and they weren't lost, but they were trapped in the Argonne Forest. They're part of the 77th New York Division. He was a New York lawyer before the war, and he leads these troops into battle. You might have heard the name Al Capone. Al Capone complained--or at least bragged, I should say--that the scars on his face were attributed to fighting that he had done in the Argonne Forest for the Lost Battalion. Well, truth be told, Capone never served in WWI. But Whittlesey did. He also was the recipient of the Medal of Honor. And he was another sad case. After the war he tried to help a number of the veterans who served under him. And
the pressure got to him. In 1921 he was aboard a ship, and was at the bar, had a drink, and also went up to the deck and jumped over. Another tragedy of the war. And then the biggest hero of the Argonne, and perhaps WWI, is Corporal--later Sergeant--Alvin York, who single-handedly captures 132 Germans soldiers in an area in the Argonne Forest. In actuality the mission that he was on was to help relieve the lost battalion that were close by. And he tried to attack an area where Germans were in a rail line, and they were cut off. And he's left by himself with some of his comrades who were trapped, and he ends up tricking the Germans and gets them captured. And it helps the breakthrough to get the Lost Battalion out of there. The lasting legacy of the Meuse Argonne is the cemetery. Part of the American Battle Monuments Commission--originally eight cemeteries that were built overseas. General Pershing becomes the chairman of the ABMC. And it's important to him to have monuments in cemeteries in France. The United States government made a pact with the American people, and that was, your loved ones--you could either decide to keep them in perpetuity overseas in one of the ABMC cemeteries, or, at government expense, we will bring them back to the United States for burial at either veterans cemeteries or in private cemeteries. And in the case of the Meuse Argonne, more than 14,000 families wanted their loved ones to be buried in this cemetery. And as it turns out, it is the largest cemetery. We think about the Normandy cemetery better known. But actually the Meuse Argonne is larger than the Normandy cemetery. And that's not bragging rights, but it's just the sheer fact that the American families wanted their loved ones to be remembered overseas. And as we now are approaching the centennial, the hundredth anniversary of this battle in the war, I think it's really important for Americans to remember the sacrifices made by not only the 1.2 million that served in the Meuse Argonne, but there were a number--about 800,000 more who also served in France. Plus there were about another two million more who were ready to come overseas had there have been transportation and had the war gone on later. So as we get to the hundredth anniversary of the war and the American participation in this battle, I would ask you to remember these individual and pay tribute to them, either through your local memorials, or if you have the opportunity to visit them overseas, see the battlefields, see the memorials, and see the cemetery. Thank you. (Applause)

1: This was exceptional, and we really appreciate it. I’d like to know a little bit about how we supply these 1.2 million troops, how they were supplied with food, equipment. Who is responsible for it, because this must have been one of the largest amount of equipment in any war prior? Is that correct?

Yockelson: You’re absolutely correct. It was unprecedented. Yeah, the American civil war certainly was significant, but that was here in the United States, so we have suppliers. But overseas in France, to the credit of the American military, especially the American army, they worked hard to build supply depots there and to get food sources. But the French and the British really came forward, especially when it came to the armaments and supplying many of the small arms until the American ordinance factories in this country could step up. Plus it was like WWII, where a number of factories went from, say, producing toys to producing war goods. But it was largely from the standpoint of the Allies that really came through, especially with the planes, the artillery, gas warfare, which the Americans used. But as far as the food went, a lot of that was shipped from the United States, and it was set up in supply depots. But we also tried to buy foodstuff from the Europeans. And I spent a little bit of time on that in the book, talking about coffee and talking about how well the American troops had to be fed, especially behind the lines. Now once they got to the front, it was a lot more difficult. But you're absolutely right. It was a huge undertaking. And it really shows how well this country, when pushed, we really can get together, and even though we weren't prepared
of the war, in a short amount of time it became a huge— not only in the United States, but also overseas, we became a huge war production.

2: Some people that study epidemics think that the influenza epidemic started in a training camp in Kansas. Was influenza brought over to Europe by the army in their troop ships? And how did the influenza outbreak affect Pershing’s plans?

Yockelson: I believe you’re correct. It’s my understanding that, I believe, at Camp Funston is where the flu was, as least in recent research, was determined where it started. As far as—and it certainly impacted the Americans came over. And because of the close fighting between the two sides, it spread like wildfire, of course not only in the United States, especially on the east coast, but on the battlefields. And it caught everyone by surprise, and so Pershing really didn’t have a contingency plan. They were relying more and more on replacements coming from the United States to fill the ranks of soldiers who were sick. Many of them initially got pneumonia, and that’s what it was thought that they were ill from, but then it later on developed into the flu, and a large number of them either died or never made it back into combat. So that really depleted the American forces, especially in the middle of October until more replacements. The problem with the replacements though coming over is many of them hadn’t been trained. Some of them hadn’t even used a rife before. So they’re going into the frontlines with these officers, some of them not well trained, and so it was again learning a lot of this on the fly.

Clarke: Mitchell, I’ve got a question from the live stream viewers. This is Paul, and he’s asking, who among the American officers deserves the most credit for planning and executing the logistically difficult shifting of forces from St. Mihiel to the Meuse Argonne sector?

Yockelson: Oh, that’s definitely George C. Marshall. Really, he was given the battle plan. He developed it. In fact the French had given him a battle plan that was about the size of the Chicago phone book, and Pershing told him to toss that aside, and they came up with their own plan that was like twelve pages long and figured out how to ship these troops. Marshall was a brilliant administrator and logistician. In fact, if you want to read a really good book about WWI, I highly recommend his memoirs, which were published in the 1970s. He goes into great detail of everything from where he billeted to who he liked and who he didn’t like. It’s a wonderful read.

3: Did the troops previously commanded by General Pershing serve in this battle?

Yockelson: The troops, you mean the--

3: Black troops.

Yockelson: No. Well, that’s an excellent question as well. The army segregated at the time. So the troops actually in the 10th Cavalry were never used overseas. They were primarily still along the Mexican border. And it became a huge controversy at the time, and it’s of course still a controversy, of why weren’t African American troops used in larger numbers in the front? There was one all African American division--the 92nd--that was attached for a while to First Army, that did pretty well, although it answered the question about the officers. Its officers were really poor. The men themselves were great soldiers, but they were poorly led. And then there was a provisional division, meaning only four regiments of infantry, was in the 93rd, the most famous of which was the 369th, a National Guard unit largely out of Harlem in New York. They were entirely attached to the French. The remainder of the African Americans--there was something like 200,000 of African Americans in the AEF overseas. The rest of them had jobs such a stevedores, unloading ships in the ports and the docks, also labor battalions doing construction. And some of them were in pioneer units, which was a combination of engineers and infantry that went along and built the roads.
4: I believe Pershing died in 1948, so another thirty years. Could you tell us just briefly about those thirty years?
Yockelson: Sure. Real quickly after the war, he, as I mentioned, becomes chairman of the ABMC. He's also army chief of staff for a while, so he's heavily engaged. And in the 1930s his health is poor, but he's still able to travel quite a bit overseas to France and administer the construction of the memorials and the monuments. And then around—in the early 1940s his health really takes a downturn, and he spends his final days in Walter Reed in what's known as the Pershing suite. When WWII breaks out, he tries to give President Roosevelt some advice. Most of the general officers such as Patton and Eisenhower would visit him at the Pershing suite before they went overseas. But he does die in 1948 and is celebrated as the commander who brought the Americans into the modern age and allowed them to fight and become the great army that they were in WWII. Thank you.
(Applause)
Clarke: Thank you to Dr. Mitchell Yockelson for sharing his work and to the United States World War One centennial commission for sponsoring this program. The book is Forty-Seven Days: How Pershing's Warriors Came of Age to Defeat the German Army in World War I, published by New American Library. To learn more about the World War One Centennial Commission, visit WorldWar1Centennial.org. To learn more about the book, the author, or the Museum and Library, visit us in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on Pritzker Military Presents.
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