

General of the Armies John J. Pershing

Synopsis: John Joseph Pershing was born in Laclede, Missouri, on September 13, 1860. He graduated from West Point and went on to fight in the Indian wars as well as the Spanish-American War and the Philippines insurrection. In World War I, he commanded the American Expeditionary Force in Europe as General of the Armies, helping bring an end to the war. He quietly retired after the war and was buried with honors at Arlington National Cemetery.

Early Life: John J. Pershing was the first of eight children born to John F. Pershing and Anne Elizabeth Thompson Pershing of Laclede, MO. John's father was a prosperous businessman, working as a merchant during the Civil War and later owning a general store in Laclede and serving as postmaster. The family lost most of its assets during the panic of 1873, and John's father was forced to take a job as a traveling salesman while John worked on the family farm.

After high school graduation, John J. Pershing took a job teaching African American students at Prairie Mound School. He saved his money and then went to Missouri Norman School (now Truman State University) for two years. Though he grew up in an era of Civil War heroes, young John had no desire for a military career. But when an invitation to take the exam for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point came his way, he applied and received the top grade. Though not a great student (he would place 30th in a class of 77) he was elected class president, and his superiors noticed his leadership qualities. Pershing was frequently promoted, and as the funeral train of General Ulysses S. crossed the Hudson River, he was commanding the West Point color guard.

After graduation, Pershing served in the 6th Cavalry in a number of military engagements against the Sioux and Apache tribes. In the Spanish-American War he commanded the all-black 10th Cavalry and was later awarded the Silver Citation Star (later upgraded to the Silver Star) for his valor. After the defeat of Spain, Pershing was stationed in the Philippines from 1899 to 1903 and during his tour led American forces against the Philippine resistance. By this time, Pershing had earned the sobriquet "Black Jack" Pershing for his service with the African American 10th Cavalry, but the moniker also came to signify his stern demeanor and rigorous discipline.

By 1905, John J. Pershing's stellar military record had caught the eye of President Theodore Roosevelt, who petitioned Congress to give Pershing a diplomatic post as a military attaché in Tokyo to observe the Sino-Russian War. That same year, Pershing met and married Helen Frances Warren, daughter of Wyoming Senator Francis E. Warren. They had four children.

Upon Pershing's return from Japan, Roosevelt nominated him as a brigadier general, a move Congress approved, allowing Pershing to skip three ranks and more than 800 officers senior to him. Accusations that Pershing's promotion was more due to political connections than his military abilities erupted. However, the controversy died quickly as many officers spoke favorably about his talents.

Family Tragedy: After serving another tour in the Philippines, in late 1913, the Pershing family moved to San Francisco, California. Two years later, while on assignment in Texas, Pershing received devastating news that his wife and three daughters had been killed in a

fire. Only his six-year-old son, Warren, survived. Pershing was distraught and, according to friends, never fully recovered from the tragedy. He plunged himself into his work to blunt the sorrow while his sister, Mary, cared for young Warren.

But John J. Pershing was soon called to duty closer to home. On March 9, 1916, Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa's guerrilla band raided the U.S. border town of Columbus, New Mexico, killing 18 American soldiers and civilians and wounding nearly 20 others. President Woodrow Wilson, ignoring international protocol, ordered Pershing to capture Villa. For nearly two years, Pershing's army tracked the elusive desperado throughout northern Mexico and clashed in several skirmishes but was unsuccessful in capturing Villa.

Leading the AEF in Europe: In 1917, as America entered World War I, General John J. Pershing was appointed commander in chief of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) to assist the Allied powers against German forces. At the time, the U.S. Army was composed of 130,000 men and no reserves. In just 18 months, Pershing accomplished the near impossible by transforming the ill-prepared American military into a disciplined fighting machine of more than 2 million men.

When John J. Pershing and his men arrived in Europe, Allied military officials expected the Americans to "fill in" the depleted European divisions. Pershing disagreed, citing the different training of the U.S. military and asserting that a fresh, united American force would be more effective against the Germans. Pershing won the argument and led his forces in numerous battles, including the Battle of St. Mihiel and the Battle of Cantigny. In October 1918, in the Meuse-Argonne offensive, Pershing's army helped destroy German resistance, which led to the Armistice the following month.

Later Life: For his service during the war, in 1919 President Woodrow Wilson, with Congress's approval, promoted Pershing to General of the Armies, a post previously held only by George Washington. Then, in 1921, he became the U.S. Army Chief of Staff, a position he held until his retirement in 1924, at age 64. In his civilian life, Pershing resisted the temptation to enter politics and declined to make public strategy suggestions about the uneasy world of 1930s and '40s not wishing to upstage the nation's active military leaders.

In the final decade of his life, Pershing's health began to decline due to heart problems. On July 15, 1948, while recovering from a stroke, Pershing died in his sleep. His body lay in state in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol as an estimated 300,000 people came to pay their respects. He was buried with honors at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, DC.

Military Awards: Distinguished Service Cross, Distinguished Service Medal, Silver Star, Indian Campaign Medal, Spanish Campaign Medal, Army of Cuban Occupation Medal, Philippine Campaign Medal, Mexican Service Medal, World War I Victory Medal with 15 battle clasps, Army of Occupation of Germany Medal, which had a profile of Pershing on its obverse, making Pershing the only soldier in the history of the U.S. Army eligible to wear a medal with his own likeness on it--Navy admirals George Dewey, William T. Sampson and Richard E. Byrd were also entitled to wear medals with their own image on them.

Masonic History: Brother John J. "Blackjack" Pershing received his Masonic degrees in December 1888 in Lincoln Lodge #19, Lincoln, NE. He was also became a member of Lincoln Chapter #6 Royal Arch Masons, Mt. Moriah Commandery #4 of Knight Templars,

and Sesostris Shrine in 1894, all in Lincoln, NE. In 1919 he was made an Honorary Member of Stansbury Lodge #19 in D.C. In 1941 or 1942 Vice President Harry S. Truman presented Pershing a certificate as an Honorary Member of the Grand Lodge of Missouri (Pershing's home state). Pershing also became a member of the Scottish Rite in Wheeling, WV in 1920 and received his 33° Honorary in 1930.