



# John J. Pershing: Honoring the Fallen

## Handout A: Narrative

### BACKGROUND

America has fought and won two world wars. They are considered “world wars” because combat operations spanned the entire globe. From the Philippines and North Africa to the rolling fields of France and Belgium and Great Britain, the wars left great scars upon the land and under the sea. They also left their mark on thousands of American families who lost fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters in the conflicts.

Honoring our fallen soldiers has always been an essential part of the healing process of the United States in the months and years following a conflict. The Civil War saw the creation of a great national cemetery outside the nation’s capital, intended for those who dedicated at least a portion of their lives to the service of their nation. Another famous Civil War cemetery was dedicated in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania by President Lincoln. In his now immortal speech given at the dedication, he stated:

“We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did her.”

The commander of the American Expeditionary Force during this conflict, John Pershing, felt this same obligation to remember who had fought and given their last full measure of devotion to the cause of freedom.

### NARRATIVE

John Pershing was born in rural Missouri in 1860. His father, a businessman, served as a sutler during the Civil War that embroiled the nation after John’s birth. By 1882, John Pershing was looking for a way to escape rural Missouri and to challenge himself academically. He found a solution to both of these issues by attending the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York.

Pershing excelled in the rigorous environment of West Point. He became known as a leader amongst his class, even serving as an escort in the funeral of the former president, general, and West Point graduate Ulysses S. Grant in 1885. Pershing graduated the following year at the age of 26 and began his career in the military.

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His first assignments were in the wilder parts of the western United States, in support of the final campaigns of the Indian wars. By 1897, he was back at West Point, this time serving as an instructor. When the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898, Pershing was sent to Cuba as a quartermaster with the 10th Cavalry Regiment. Known as the “Buffalo Soldiers,” this regiment would serve with great distinction during the battles of San Juan Hill and Kettle Hill. Pershing himself would be cited for gallantry under fire.

After the Spanish-American War, Pershing would go on to serve in several posts. From the Philippines to Washington, D.C. to Tokyo, Pershing’s service took him all around the world. By 1905, he was appointed Brigadier General by President Theodore Roosevelt, who admired his military abilities. Throughout his career, Pershing gained a reputation for being a fair but stern disciplinarian, as well as an excellent leader of men. These abilities made him a prime candidate for a sensitive operation along the border of the United States and Mexico—attempting to track down rebel leader Poncho Villa.

Before he completed this mission, however, tragedy struck. Pershing’s wife and three of his children were killed in an accidental house fire. Only his young son, Warren, survived. This tragedy deeply affected Pershing. However, being the soldier he was, he knew he had to return to his mission.

Although ultimately unsuccessful in capturing Poncho Villa, Pershing was able to crush his band of revolutionaries. This success made him an ideal candidate to command U.S. forces as President Woodrow Wilson led the nation into the First World War.

Pershing served with distinction throughout the war. Leading his men through the bloody battles of Cantigny, Belleau Wood, Chateau-Thierry, Saint-Mihiel, and Meuse-Argonne, among others, Pershing proved American forces were the match of any of those in Europe. The addition of American forces helped tip the balance of forces in favor of the Allies, helping bring about the armistice that finally ended the war.

The war was not without cost. Although the number of American casualties was far below those of its European partners, the United States still paid dearly. In total, the United States suffered around 320,000 casualties, which included around 116,000 deaths. The Meuse-Argonne Offensive alone cost the United States around 122,000 men.

The question that now occupied General Pershing’s mind was how these men would be remembered and honored for their service. After his retirement in 1924, Pershing served the men affected by the war in several capacities. Even before his retirement, he had helped to form the Reserve Officers Association in 1922. This organization worked to protect former service members by giving them training and education to help them adapt to civilian life. He also served in leadership capacities with the Sons of the American Revolution in order to advocate for the constitutional ideals and principles he believed his men had fought and died for.

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Finally, Pershing was also named as the first Chairman of the American Battle Monuments Commission. Congress established this Commission in 1923 with the mission of commemorating U.S. armed forces and establishing suitable war memorials and burial grounds in foreign countries. Serving as chairman from 1923-1948, Pershing saw the beginning stages of this construction. As Europe rebuilt after the First World War, Pershing went to work overseeing the construction of monuments and cemeteries honoring and remembering the efforts of American soldiers to the war effort.

All across the European countryside, memorials sprang up from Brookwood Cemetery in England to Cantigny, St. Mihiel, Somme, Belleau Wood, and Oise-Aisne in France, and many more. Pristine cemeteries and monuments were built and maintained so that the sacrifices of the brave soldiers of the United States would not be forgotten. After the conclusion of the Second World War, more cemeteries were built from North Africa to Florence to Saipan. The commission sought to remember everyone who fought and sacrificed. The cemeteries include the famous cemetery at Omaha Beach in Normandy, featured in the film *Saving Private Ryan*. The largest of these cemeteries is the one located in the Meuse-Argonne region of France, which contains over 14,000 graves.

Today, the American Battle Monuments Commission continues its work of honoring members of the American armed forces. Because they are responsible for maintaining a total of 25 cemeteries around the world, their work is never finished. Much of its success at this task can be attributed to the work of its first Chairman, John Pershing. He was a man who knew that the actions of these brave men must never be forgotten.