



Why Pershing Matters

The name Pershing resonates with Americans more than a century after his greatest achievements on the battlefield.

He is remembered as much for his development of leaders as for his exploits in war. Other commanders in history had the ability to train and motivate troops, but Pershing was among the first who recognized and developed the potential to lead that is in young Americans from all walks of life. Leadership development was his lifelong focus.

From 1891 to 1895, as Professor of Military Science & Tactics at the University of Nebraska--Lincoln, Pershing, himself then a lieutenant and only 31 years old, set out not simply to teach tactics and military drill but to develop leaders. He did this by founding "Company A," a precision drill unit that provided students in the R.O.T.C. Program an opportunity to grow and challenge themselves within the bonds of brotherhood. "Company A" later briefly became "Varsity Rifles" and then was renamed "Pershing Rifles" by the cadets in honor of their mentor.

As Pershing's reputation and stature grew, so did his impact on young Americans. Pershing Rifles became the National Honorary Military Society of Pershing Rifles with chapters in R.O.T.C. programs nationwide. The organization used the same proven principles of challenge, discipline and accomplishment within a framework of brotherhood. The organization has contributed thousands of young leaders to American military, civic and professional life. It helped establish the foundation on which the character and performance of these future leaders was built. And it has resulted in bonds of friendship lasting lifetimes.

Pershing's emphasis on leadership, as well as the potential and value of the individual American, never wavered. He was a hard and uncompromising man but, for one of his era, relatively blind to appearances. Likely encouraged by his experiences teaching at a Negro school near his hometown of Laclede, Missouri at the age of 17, he voluntarily served several tours of duty with the 10th Cavalry Regiment ("Buffalo Soldiers") of US Negro troops. That they were among the best soldiers in the Army was not generally known at the time. Pershing's service with them was a lifelong point of pride and affection for him but largely scorned by others and resulted in his nickname, "Blackjack."

Though dead for more than seven decades, John Joseph Pershing has lessons to teach America. Were he alive today, he undoubtedly would continue to see the hope and potential in American youth—men and women—of all backgrounds and races. He would want to give them the opportunity to be challenged, to see and reach their full potential, and to do it in a framework of friendship and mutual support. Challenges—even those affecting survival—come and go. The ability to call up our best to meet those challenges remains. It is the enduring legacy of John J. Pershing.