

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 162

“We Just Got Here”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The beginning of the year 1918 marked three and a half years of war. Forty-two months of fighting in the biggest, bloodiest conflict ever seen, and remarkably, despite all the sacrifices made by all the belligerent powers, at this moment it remained entirely unclear which side was going to win.

The big question, the one that was on everyone’s mind, was surely “Where are the Americans?” George M. Cohan’s smash hit song promised that “the Yanks are coming,” but if the Yanks are coming, well, *when?*

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 162. We Just Got Here.

Last week, I talked about the German offensives of 1918. I was pretty dismissive about them, because by any reasonable measure, they were a failure. The Germans paid a dear cost in casualties and supplies in exchange for capturing swaths of territory that will provide them no benefit whatsoever.

Now, *I* say this with the benefit of hindsight. The Allied commanders weren’t in a position to be as aloof and dispassionate at the time as we can be a century after the fact. The final weeks of the 1917 campaign season had seen a few minor Allied accomplishments in the Balkans and in the Near East, but it had also seen two serious setbacks. The Caporetto offensive had pushed the Italians deep into their own territory and forced Britain and France to send soldiers into northern Italy to help shore up the Italian line, and the new Bolshevik government in Russia had quit the war.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster in Italy, the three Allied powers, Britain, France, and Italy, agreed to a suggestion from David Lloyd George to form a Supreme War Council to direct further military operations on the Western and Italian Fronts. The council would consist of leaders from the three governments and representatives of their militaries. The French military representative would be General Ferdinand Foch, the British military representative would be General Sir Henry Wilson, and the Italian military representative would be General Luigi Cadorna, until recently their commander in chief.

The United States, remember, is not formally a member of the alliance, so no US political representative was appointed, but a US Army general, 63-year-old Tasker Bliss, was appointed the US military representative.

The political and military leaders of the Supreme War Council would have endured many sleepless nights over the winter of 1917-18. Last year had ended badly for the Allies, and they knew full well what was coming next. The Germans were already shipping soldiers and equipment westward. By spring, the Germans would have numerical superiority in the West, and they would certainly try to take advantage of it. All the Allies could do was wait to see where the hammer fell. If the Germans proved able to renew the advance into France that the Allies had barely managed to contain in 1914, they might very well force an end to the war. On the other hand, if the Allies could withstand the onslaught until August-ish, and if the Americans could transport their newly minted soldiers in the numbers they were promising, the Allies would regain numerical superiority. By then it would be too late to mount the Big Push in 1918, but with luck, Germany might be defeated in 1919. 1920, at the outside.

The front lines in the West have scarcely moved in the three years since the initial German offensive. The years 1915 and 1916 saw a lot of the same old same-old as commanders on both sides wasted large numbers of lives on frontal assaults against entrenched enemies armed with modern weapons and had nothing to show for it.

But this past year, 1917, had been different. The British had finally placed large numbers of trained soldiers into France, and they brought with them improved military technology and tactics, like tanks and aerial reconnaissance. British artillery had learned to shoot off the map, allowing for devastating artillery barrages to begin without any warning. This new style of combat had the potential to return the Western Front to mobile warfare, except that the Germans had come up with new tactics of their own. Ludendorff's defense in depth had negated many of the British advantages, until the Battle of Passchendaele, in which defense in depth had proved ineffective against the British tactic of "bite and hold," in which British units would advance only a short distance into the enemy defensive zone before hunkering down to rest and wait for their heavy artillery and machine guns to catch up.

Bite and hold proved to be the Achilles' heel of defense in depth, and once the British started doing it, Ludendorff was forced to go back to placing more soldiers on the front line, and

partially return to the older defensive tactic of resisting an enemy advance right at the front. But bite and hold was not going to win the war. It was too slow. At the rate the British were advancing in 1917, it would take them more than a hundred years to reach Berlin, a fact the Germans gleefully pointed out in the propaganda sheets they were dropping into British trenches. The German *Stoßtruppen*, on the other hand, held the potential to win the war, and as you already know, Ludendorff was counting on them to break the enemy lines in 1918.

But until the German offensive began, there was nothing more Allied commanders could do. Wait. Did I say there was nothing the Allied commanders could do? No, there was *one* thing they could do: get as many warm bodies onto the battlefield and into the trenches before the inevitable German attack. How could they do that? The French summoned as many colonial soldiers to the Western Front as they could manage, mostly from Africa. Hundreds of thousands of Africans fought for France over the course of the war. In Britain, there was a political brouhaha in early 1918 over the question of why there were not more soldiers on the front. This was at least partly due to David Lloyd George's lack of faith in Douglas Haig and his strategic choice to send British units to other fronts, such as Italy and Salonika and Egypt.

But the biggest manpower question was the one I alluded to at the top of the episode. Where are the Americans? We are now coming up on the first anniversary of the US declaration of war against Germany, and the US contribution to the Allied war effort so far has been...how shall I put this? Modest? Unimpressive? Disappointing?

There were about a quarter of a million US soldiers in France by early 1918, with the promise of many more to come, but right now that's still just a promise. The Americans already in France were mostly still in training. The Americans went in for a *lot* of training. General Pershing was particularly insistent on sharpshooter training. You see, he had examined the situation on the Western Front, and come to the conclusion that his British and French colleagues had gotten too comfortable with trench warfare, too intimidated by the machine gun. This war wasn't going to be won in a trench. It was going to be won by offensive movement, by—

No. No. Don't. Please. Just...don't. I can't believe that it's 1918 and we're still talking about frontal assaults against entrenched enemies armed with modern weapons. And yet, here we are. Pershing doesn't seem to have given sufficient thought to the possibility that maybe the French and British commanders were applying wisdom borne of tragic experience earned painfully over three nightmare years. He believed in sharpshooters—a specialty of the US military since the Civil War—and emphasized training as many of them as possible, because he believed they could pick off the German machine gun emplacements and thus open up the battlefield for an assault. Unfortunately, sufficient accuracy to get a bullet into a concrete bunker via the narrow slits that the Germans fire out of was perhaps beyond the ability even of an American soldier.

A couple of American units were on the front lines by now, at the St. Mihiel salient, south of Verdun. I mentioned this salient all the way back in episode 92. It's an oddity of the Western

Front line created by a lucky German advance in 1914, and this salient has persisted all the way into 1918. It interfered with traffic into Verdun, but the Germans have fortified it heavily and the French have never regarded it as important enough to invest the necessary resources into an offensive to reclaim it. In fact, for the past three years, this sector of the front has been so quiet that both sides have been using it as a place to rotate units when they needed to rest and rebuild. And so, it seemed the logical place to begin stationing the inexperienced American units, although from the get-go the Americans were more aggressive, spoiling for a fight. They took to the risky tactic of night raids into German trenches and by spring these were becoming an everyday—I should say “every night”—occurrence.

The Germans got tired of this after a while and attacked the US line with *Stoßtruppen* to teach the uppity Americans a lesson. The Germans assault broke through the American line, inflicted hundreds of casualties, and then the Germans withdrew before the Americans could organize a counterattack. Back home, it was billed as a victory, but it was really more like...the other thing.

The British and the French were getting tired of American delays and excuses and especially the endless American training. They wanted American soldiers placed directly into their own units as replacements. Surely this was the best way to train the new soldiers. Introduce them to the trenches and the front, under the supervision of more experienced fighters.

Pershing wasn't having it. Woodrow Wilson had instructed him to keep the American Expeditionary Force a separate and discrete army, and that's what Pershing was going to do. The Allies, in his view, were trying to reduce the US Army into a recruiting office for their own armies, not to mention reducing Pershing himself to something like director of human resources.

Then came the first German offensive, Operation Michael. You and I know that Michael isn't going to change anything, but in those early days, when the Germans kept advancing and the British kept falling back, who knew what was going to come of it?

One thing that did come of it was an agreement by the Allies that the multinational force in France needed a centralized command, and so they appointed an overall “Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Armies.” As you know from last week, the job went to the French military representative to the Supreme War Council, their Chief of Staff, the 66-year old General Ferdinand Foch. It was an act that smelled of desperation; with the Germans advancing just at the point where the British and French lines met, some kind of coordination was needed, and so here we are, although what exactly this is going to mean for the Allied command structure, well, we haven't quite worked that out yet.

The day after Foch was appointed, Pershing came to a meeting of the War Council to hear the latest British proposal. He can't have been happy with what he heard. Given the need to increase the numbers at the front as quickly as possible, and given that shipping capacity was limited, the British proposed that the Americans send over infantry only. Riflemen yes, machine gunners yes,

but that's it. Hold off on the artillery gunners, the engineers, the support people. Send infantry and only infantry, and we'll put them into the British Expeditionary Force.

This second part was nothing new. The British and the French have been pushing to integrate Americans into their units for months now. But the first part! It had a superficial logic to it. Shipping over infantry only would put the most rifles on the front lines as quickly as possible. The trouble with it was that if the goal is to build up a fully autonomous American Expeditionary Force, this is a step backward. American units will never be able to operate as an independent fighting force so long as they lack these support units the British are proposing they leave behind.

As it happened, the US Secretary of War, Newton Baker, was in France on a fact-finding visit when this controversy erupted, part of his response to domestic criticism that the American war effort was lagging. (More about that in a moment.) Secretary Baker and Pershing met and came up with a counteroffer. The United States would agree to the Allied request to send infantry only, for now, and US forces already in France would be made available to the Allied Commander-in-Chief, General Foch, to use at his discretion, with the understanding that the US still intended to assemble its forces in France into an independent army just as soon as that was feasible.

Given the emergency, they could hardly have done otherwise. It must have been a bitter pill for Pershing, but he was diplomat enough to head at once to Foch's headquarters to inform the general personally that all US forces in France were now at his disposal.

[music: Sousa, "The United States Field Artillery."]

It wasn't only the numbers of US soldiers in France that was drawing criticism; it was also US arms production. The Wilson Administration had set ambitious targets for arms production. Some might say unrealistic targets, and by the first anniversary of the US war declaration, it was becoming apparent that the targets weren't being met. Members of Congress, especially the Republicans, began wondering aloud just what was going on.

In the years leading up to the war, the United States Federal government's annual budget was just under one billion dollars per year. The war brought a sharp increase; at its peak, the Federal government was spending two billion dollars per *month*. Now, I know what you're thinking. In earlier episodes, I gave you statistics showing how the US gross domestic product was growing dramatically during this period. I also told you about Ransom Olds and Henry Ford and how their assembly-line manufacturing techniques were producing automobiles literally hundreds of times more efficiently than European manufacturers. And you've also heard me talking about US manufacture of arms and ammunition for the Allies. So you may be wondering: with all that manufacturing capacity and all that government money ready to buy up the output, this should be a piece of cake. What's the problem?

The problem is, it's never been done before. America's manufacturers have never needed to retool so suddenly and produce wildly different products. And the US government has never been this big before and has never had to oversee purchasing on this scale before. And it didn't help matters any that the administration made those wildly optimistic promises and then couldn't meet them. Yes, the US has been manufacturing arms and ammunition for the Allies for years, but we're talking here about powder and explosives, artillery shells and small arms. The knowhow to make large artillery guns in quantity, for example, simply isn't there. Well, maybe it would be a better idea to use French and British artillery guns rather than manufacture them in America and ship them to Europe, taking up scarce transport capacity that could be used to ship soldiers.

The US government was also paying inflated prices for all this wartime production that...was coming any day now. The Wilson Administration chose to look the other way when profiteering occurred. If manufacturers were getting big markups, well that just meant they'd have that much bigger an incentive to produce more, faster. Only it wasn't working out that way in practice.

A few weeks earlier, US Army General Leonard Wood had just returned from his own fact-finding trip to France. We've met General Wood before on the podcast. He had been President McKinley's personal physician, served as Governor-General of Cuba after the Spanish-American War and as US Army Chief of Staff. Wood was close to Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, two of Woodrow Wilson's most strident critics, which is likely why he got passed over for Pershing's job as commander of the AEF. Wood testified before the Senate Military Affairs Committee and reported, among other things, the troubling news that there was not a single US military airplane in all of France.

This was troubling news because last summer, just two months after the declaration of war, Congress had appropriated over \$600,000,000, which the administration promised would be used to build a fleet of 20,000 aircraft for the Western Front. That was far too optimistic, but you know, even so, here we are nearly a year after the appropriation, and Leonard Wood is telling us there isn't even *one* US airplane in France? Further accusations were made that the US government's Committee on Public Information was circulating bogus photographs intended to create the appearance of squadrons of US planes in France when in fact those were French airplanes in the pictures.

This put Secretary of War Baker on the hot seat when this controversy went public. He offered to resign, but Wilson turned him down. In fact no US fighter planes would ever appear over the Western Front for the duration of the war, and only a handful of US bombers, in spite of all the grandiose promises. Although the US was home to the first airplane, the US aircraft industry was miniscule in 1917 and could not be built up in time to make a difference at the front. Even Eddie Rickenbacker, America's most famous and most successful flying ace of the war, with 26 kills to his credit, scored every one of them flying a French airplane.

Woodrow Wilson was facing a number of other domestic political headaches at the same time these procurement scandals were breaking, and he was also facing the midterm elections, coming in November 1918. Remember that the current Congress, the 65th Congress, was elected at the same time Wilson was re-elected, in November 1916. And in this Congress, the Republicans actually hold more seats in the House of Representatives than the Democrats do, although the Democrats control the chamber with the support of its one Socialist and three Progressive members, 218-217, the narrowest possible split. In the Senate, the Democrats held a more comfortable advantage, 55-41, but an unfortunate series of deaths whittled the numbers down to 52-44. The numbers were narrow enough that anti-Wilson Democrats held the balance of power. Wilson put a lot of effort in 1918 into the Democratic primaries, in order to oust troublesome incumbents and replace them with pro-Wilson challengers—he had some success with this—and in the fall he will mix it up in the general election more so than Presidents of the time typically did. Spoiler alert: that is not going to go so well.

On one of the two biggest domestic issues of the day, women's suffrage, Wilson had come around and was now championing a constitutional amendment guaranteeing women the vote, although he has not yet been able to get Congress to approve it. On the other issue, temperance, Congress passed a constitutional amendment banning "intoxicating liquors" in December 1917 over Wilson's strenuous objections, and it is now headed to the states for ratification.

Let's face it. Woodrow Wilson has a lot on his hands. Keeping all these balls in the air was keeping Woodrow Wilson far busier than any of his predecessors, with the possible exception of Abraham Lincoln. He was complaining about it by this time, his workload, the stress of it, and his inability to get any time to himself. The 61-year old Wilson was also showing signs of deteriorating health. He'd had trouble breathing, which led to surgery to remove polyps from his nose. Those of you who have read ahead in the history of the twentieth century know that his health troubles are only going to get worse from here. For now, they were kept secret from the public, as has traditionally been the case when Presidents have health troubles.

[music: Sousa, "The United States Field Artillery."]

The first American unit the French requested was the US First Infantry Division, the Big Red One, a logical choice since it was the first American unit to arrive in France and was therefore the best trained and most experienced. General Pétain moved the First to the town of Montdidier, to help reinforce the French line at the point where Operation Michael had penetrated most deeply into French territory. By this time, Operation Michael and Operation Georgette were both finished and the Allies had some breathing room, although no one doubted that a third German offensive would soon commence.

On May 1, the Allied Supreme War Council met to take stock of the situation. The good news was that over 100,000 fresh US soldiers were expected to arrive in France by the end of the month. Per the earlier agreement, they would all be infantry, and they would all be assigned to

the BEF. But an argument broke out between the British and French representatives over who would get the Americans that arrived in June and July and August. The debate turned into a shouting match until General Foch attempted to settle the argument by proposing that beginning June 1, all newly arrived American soldiers would be divided evenly between the British and the French armies.

Well, that sounded reasonable enough, to everyone except Black Jack Pershing, who clarified for the Allied commanders that the US government had committed to turning over the May arrivals to the British, but American soldiers arriving after June 1 were his alone to command. Pershing stood firm against Lloyd George and Foch and Clemenceau until at last Clemenceau pointedly told Pershing that General Foch could not meet the great responsibility the Allies had entrusted to him unless all of them were willing to accept his authority. Foch asked Pershing whether he was willing to stand by even if the next German offensive pushed the French Army all the way back to the River Loire. (For those of you who are fuzzy on French geography, the question implied that the Germans would capture half of France, including Paris.)

Pershing told him, "I am willing to take that risk."

Tempers flared and the meeting was adjourned. The following day the Council met to continue their deliberations and David Lloyd George resolved the impasse by announcing he had found sufficient additional transport ships to allow the Americans to bring over their support units without having to reduce the numbers of infantry already scheduled to arrive. This was enough of a concession to smooth over the disagreements for now.

Meanwhile, over at Montdidier, the commander of the US First Infantry Division was spoiling for a fight. He wanted to go on the offensive, to give the Americans an opportunity to prove themselves. The French corps commander overseeing the Big Red One was happy to oblige. The objective was the village of Cantigny, recently captured by the Germans during Operation Michael, and especially the ridge that lay behind the village. If the Allies could take and hold that ridge, it would push the Germans back a mile and put pressure on one of their salients. The Americans accepted the assignment.

The First Division trained for weeks. The attack was planned for May 28. As it happened, the third German offensive, Operation Blücher, began the day before, but the Battle of Cantigny went ahead anyway. With support from French artillery, flamethrowers, and even a few of the new French Schneider tanks, the Americans took Cantigny and the ridge beyond in a matter of hours.

The Americans immediately began to dig in on the ridge because, remember, the Germans do defense in depth. In just a few hours, German artillery opened up, heralding the enemy counterattack. It lasted two days, but the Americans held the ridge, despite heavy casualties. The value of the ridge was not worth the price in blood the Americans paid for it, as Lieutenant Colonel George Marshall, who was with the First Division at the time, would later concede. But

that wasn't the point. The point was to prove to friend and foe alike that the US Army was just as capable of taking an enemy position and holding it as anyone else.

By this time, however, farther south along the front, Operation Blücher had brought German units to the River Marne and brought to every French soldier unpleasant memories of the dark days of August 1914. In Paris, sixty miles away, civilians began fleeing the city and the French government once again began preparations to move to Bordeaux.

The Germans were threatening to cross the Marne at the town of Château-Thierry, where there were a railroad bridge and a highway bridge across the river. The French Tenth Colonial Division held that position, but General Pétain, seeing the strategic importance of those bridges, sent for reinforcements. No French or British units were available, so he put out a call to the AEF for help. Pershing sent the US Second and Third Infantry Divisions, which were newly arrived, not regarded as fully trained, and were a hundred miles away.

The Third Infantry began its march to Château-Thierry. Luckily, the division included a motorized machine gun battalion, equipped with trucks, which rushed ahead to the town. Arriving on May 31, they set up their machine guns in support of the French units and held the bridges until the rest of the Third Division could arrive three days later.

Stymied at Château-Thierry, the German advance turned westward and broke through French lines at the town of Belleau. On June 2, the Second Division, which included a Marine unit, arrived just as the French were retreating from the town through a nearby hunting reserve that the French called *le Bois de Belleau*. The Belleau Wood.

The Fifth Marine Regiment arrived at the site of the French retreat. The French colonel knew English but didn't trust his pronunciation, so he pulled out a pad and pencil, wrote a note, and handed it to an American Marine officer. The note called for the Americans to retreat. The Marine, Captain Lloyd Williams, read the note and famously blurted out, "Retreat hell, we just got here!"

The Marines dug in. The Germans attacked and were repulsed. A few days later, the Americans counterattacked. Legend has it that one sergeant ordered his marines forward with the taunt, "Come on, you sons of bitches, do you want to live forever?"

The fight over the Belleau Wood lasted more than three weeks. Again, the effort both sides put into controlling this patch of ground far exceeded its strategic value, but that wasn't the point. The point was that the Americans wanted to prove their mettle and the Germans wanted to teach the upstarts a lesson.

But it was the Germans who got schooled. The weary and hungry German soldiers couldn't help but notice that the Americans were better fed, better equipped, better rested, and in higher spirits than they were. On June 26, the Germans withdrew from Belleau Wood.

The Battle of Belleau Wood holds a special place in American military history for the same reason that the Battle of Vimy Ridge holds a special place in Canadian military history. Europe's castoff children, the scruffy colonials from across the Atlantic, the wretched refuse of Europe's teeming shores, had returned. And they proved themselves a match for the finest army on the continent.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks to all of you for listening, and thank you, Charles, for being a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons help cover the costs of storage and hosting the podcast, and even buy me a book or two now and then, so if you'd like to help out, visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons. Follow us on Twitter, on Facebook, leave a comment at the website, and please leave a rating and review at the iTunes store. iTunes is the 300-pound gorilla of podcasting, and your ratings and reviews help us find new listeners, and you can leave a rating and review even if you aren't using iTunes yourself.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we begin a whole new story thread, the tale of a small nation with a surprisingly large impact on world affairs, despite the fact that before the war, few Europeans or Americans even knew who they were. The little country that could, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. One notable figure involved in those American trench raids I talked about was 38-year old Douglas MacArthur, chief of staff of the US 42nd Division and the son of General Arthur MacArthur, whom we first met all the way back in episode 5, during the Spanish-American War. The younger MacArthur led a number of trench raids, even though that wasn't his job and he wasn't supposed to. He went on the raids unarmed, except for a swagger stick, and on one memorable occasion, he was able to force a German colonel to surrender by poking him in the back with the swagger stick and convincing him it was a pistol. MacArthur kept at this until he was injured in a German gas attack. But that wouldn't be the end of his military career. He's barely gotten started.

[music: Closing War Theme]