John J. Pershing: Frontier Cavalryman

Donald Smythe S.J.
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By DONALD SMYTHE, S. J.*

On June 12, 1886, John J. Pershing graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Academically his record there had been middling: thirtieth in a class of seventy-seven. But in leadership and soldierliness he had been unsurpassed. He graduated as First Captain of Cadets and the man picked by his classmates as most likely to become their first general.¹

Five branches of service were open to top graduates of the Academy: engineering, ordnance, artillery, cavalry, and infantry. Not being a top graduate, Pershing's choice was restricted to the last three. It probably didn't bother him much. He had always been a superb horseman (few people ever looked better astride a charger) and made his choice without hesitation. He picked the cavalry—specifically the 6th Cavalry, then on duty in the southwest hunting Geronimo.

The 6th Cavalry had a long and illustrious history. Organized in 1861, it had served at Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, and Cold Harbor. After the Civil War it had seen action throughout the Southwest and, after 1875, in Arizona, where during Pershing's last year at West Point it was busy chasing Apaches. The possibility that he might see immediate active service against the Apaches was one reason why Pershing picked the 6th Cavalry.²

Another reason was that he felt that promotion might be more rapid there. Pershing was frankly very ambitious. He was not the type to do his duty with supreme disregard

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*Woodstock College, Woodstock, Md.


I wish to thank Mr. Francis Warren Pershing, General Pershing's son, for permission to quote from the Pershing Papers.

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of his own career or with happy indifference as to whether promotion would follow. He was always calculating which were the opportunities that favored advancement, always forwarding to his superiors good reports about himself which recommended promotion. Anyone doubting this has simply to consult the "Application for Promotion" folder which is found in the Pershing Papers at the Library of Congress.³

On September 30, 1886, Pershing began service at Fort Bayard, a small post of adobe brick in southwest New Mexico, eight miles from Silver City (then in its heyday as a prosperous mining town) and seventy miles from the Mexican border. It was in frontier country: dry alkali sand, networks of canyons, and rock-strewn mountains. There was broiling heat by day and nipping cold by night. It was precisely the type of country and the kind of climate which Pershing was to encounter thirty years later when he led a punitive expedition across the Mexican border in Chihuahua after Pancho Villa.

At the time, however, it was not Mexicans the 6th Cavalry was chasing, but Indians. True, Geronimo, the great Apache leader, had surrendered on September 4, 1886, over three weeks before Pershing came to Fort Bayard. But Mangas, one of the minor chiefs, was still free and roaming; since it made no difference to the scattered white settlers whether they were killed by the supreme war lord of the Apaches or by some lesser chief (they were dead just the same), Mangas had to be hunted down and disposed of. In October, 1886, therefore, soon after Pershing's arrival at Bayard, two Cavalry troops, including Pershing's Troop L, went out to scout for Mangas in the Mogollón Mountains to the northwest of Bayard.⁴

The details of the preparations for the trip were left to

3. JJP, 381.
I am indebted to Mrs. Seth Cook, of Washington, D.C., and Mrs. Mary Ann Rose Harbottle, of San Diego, California, both of whom were at Fort Bayard with Pershing, for reading the manuscript on this period. I wish also to thank Marion F. Humphrey, Jr., who interviewed Mrs. Harbottle for me.

4. PA, ch. iv (December, 1937), pp. 3-4; JJP, 380.
Pershing. With the help of an “excellent” first sergeant of many years’ experience, ten days rations were prepared and everything made ready to go. But when the day of departure came, Pershing discovered to his surprise a marked difference between the army as conceived at West Point with its spit and polish and troops as they were in the actual conditions of a frontier post. A number of the men, including the first sergeant, had prepared for taking the field by patronizing the post trader’s bar more liberally than usual. Pershing was “amazed” at the condition of some of the soldiers before him and at their raffish appearance in a variety of hats and leggings. He must have been surprised, too, the next morning, to find that the horses had not been hobbled when grazing, and, startled by a noise, had stomped during the night. “It was a somewhat embarrassing situation to find ourselves,” he remarked; “cavalrymen afoot in such a wild country with not a horse in sight.”

By noon the following day the horses were all rounded up, and the march resumed for Mangas. Sobered up and dried out by now, the soldiers were reliable and efficient—once recovered from their spree. But Pershing understood why men would be tempted to go on a drunk at the prospect of an Indian campaign in New Mexico. It was sometimes forty to fifty miles from one water hole to the next, and often necessary to make “dry camp.” The sun beat down unmercifully, squeezing the water out of horses and men and drying their skin, while the dust from the broad alkali flats parched throats and combined with wind to crack lips, ears, and faces. Sometimes the horses were so crazed with thirst when a water hole was reached that the men had to beat them back with rifle butts until they themselves had drunk. At other times Indians poisoned a water hole by throwing in carcasses of dead animals. The men then would boil the water; this killed the germs, but the smell and the taste were still bad, even when mixed with coffee. They were probably not too unhappy, therefore, when, after three weeks of campaigning,

5. Ibid., pp. 4-5.
they heard that Mangas had been captured in Arizona, after a pursuit which covered six mountain ranges. They returned to Fort Bayard.6

Shortly after this, Pershing was again sent out from Bayard, this time in charge of a detachment to locate heliograph stations from Fort Bayard to Fort Stanton, 150 miles east-northeast, as the crow flies. In a country as wide open as New Mexico, with its recurrent history of Indian troubles, rapid communications between frontier posts regarding Indian and troop movements was important, and the heliograph (a device for telegraphing by means of the sun's rays reflected from a mirror) was a convenient and inexpensive means for this.

The system, however, required care in placing the stations; they had to be high in the mountains or hills (sometimes 6,000 to 7,000 feet above sea level), about twenty-five miles apart, and fairly accessible for supplying the three to eight men usually stationed there. The job took a month, and when Pershing arrived at Fort Stanton, friends noticed his sunburned face and skin bronzed from long periods under the sun. Unfortunately, there was never any reason to use the heliograph stations after Pershing had established them.7

(After Geronimo was captured, General Nelson A. Miles explained to him the use of the heliograph. Geronimo replied that he had often seen the flashes on the mountain heights, but had believed them to be the work of spirits and therefore had carefully avoided going near these points of the mountains.) 8

With the exception of the short hunt for Mangas and the heliograph assignment, John's duties were routine and confined to the post. "Bayard is a nice, six-company post," he wrote to a friend; "is regimental headquarters, good location,

7. PA, ch. iv, p. 5; Julius Penn to class, January 16, 1887, in First Class Annual of the Class of '86, United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, for the Year 1887 (Poughkeepsie, N.Y., 1887), pp. 58-59.
surrounding scenery grand, and climate, as far as I know, pleasant, the officers of the 6th and of the garrison, are all good men, most of them married, making this post all that could be desired." (One of the officers, Captain Adna R. Chaffee, later commanded the American expeditionary forces in China during the Boxer Rebellion and, still later, was the Army Chief of Staff.) Work consisted of troop drills, instructions in tactics, general and garrison courts, boards of survey, and other routine duties. Little of real excitement happened. The thrilling period had ended with the capture of Geronimo just before Pershing came to Bayard.

Except for an occasional Indian scare thereafter, or the arrest of white cattle thieves, or an occasional hunting expedition, field service during Pershing's four years in New Mexico furnished little actual training in the real work of a soldier, which is fighting. A certain amount of seasoning took place, of course, and learning about life in the real army as opposed to the cadet army at West Point. Pershing remembered undergoing "the rather trying experience through which every young officer had to pass before he learned the ways of the service." Major General William A. Kobbé told Pershing later: "There is a good deal of nonsense talked about experience. The experience a large majority of our officers got at frontier posts between the Civil and Spanish Wars was pretty worthless." 11

One experience Pershing did have, however, and which he probably never forgot, was a lesson in responsibility. When he once asked Captain Harry Cavenaugh if he might borrow his bed roll, the later said, "Sure, go ahead." Pershing used it, then forgot to return it. Some days afterwards Cavenaugh was suddenly called out to the field and went to the closet to get his bed roll for the journey. When it wasn't there, and when Cavenaugh learned that Pershing had never brought it back he swore like the trooper that he was. A bed roll con-

9. Pershing to class, March 9, 1887, in *First Class Annual*, p. 61.
10. Ibid., PA, ch. iv, pp. 2-8.
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tained a change of linen, shoes, etc., and taking the field without one was nothing to look forward to. Eventually he tracked Pershing down and gave him a very clear and distinct idea of what he thought of him for his negligence. “And remember, Mister Pershing,” he added, “the first thing a man learns in the army is courtesy. It starts from the day you learn the salute.”

Pershing seems to have learned the lesson well, judging by the overall impression he made while at Fort Bayard. As one who was his senior officer later explained it: “In those days when a youngster joined a regiment, he was not expected to express himself on military matters until he had some little experience. But there was a certain something in Pershing’s appearance and manner which made him an exception to the rule. Within a very short time after he came to the post, a senior officer would turn to him and say: ‘Pershing, what do you think of this?’ And his opinion was such that we always listened to it. He was quiet, unobtrusive in his opinions. But when asked, he always went to the meat of a question in a few words. From the first he had responsible duties thrown on him. We all learned to respect and like him.”

Mary Ann Rose Harbottle, whose father gave Pershing instructions in Indian fighting at Fort Bayard and whose mother filled him with pies and doughnuts when he dropped by for a social call, remembered him pretty much the same way. “Pershing was a very quiet, retiring sort of a man,” she said. “He was one of those men whose career meant everything to him. His outstanding characteristics at that time were kindness and honesty and uprightness. He was very good to the enlisted men, i.e., he didn’t try to domineer over them. Everyone respected him, both officers and men alike.”

Only once did Mrs. Harbottle recall seeing Pershing angry. That was when he saw one of the enlisted men mis-

12. Interview with Mrs. Seth Cook (Cavenaugh’s daughter), March 16, 1961.
13. Quoted in MacAdam, World’s Work, XXXVII, 290.
treat a horse. "Pershing couldn't stand that," she com-
mented; "he just wouldn't have any of the animals abused."

One other quality which Mrs. Harbottle observed in Per-
shing (although not until many years later) was his memory
for names. In 1927 or 1928, over forty years afterwards,
Pershing encountered her again, this time in San Diego. They
fell to reminiscing about old times, and Pershing spoke
familiarly of her father and the other three men who had
given him instructions in Indian fighting at Fort Bayard:
Charlie Botton, Henry Lester, and Billy Chamberlain. He
called them by name, men whom he had known but casually
and had not seen for nearly half a century.14

Pershing did not stay long at Fort Bayard, but he en-
joyed himself while he did. He liked horseback rides through
the country, band concerts, hops, parties, theatricals, and
visits to nearby points of interest. One who was Pershing's
senior officer recalled that "he was genial and full of fun. No
matter what the work or what the play, he always took a
willing, leading part. He was punctilious in his observance of
post duties; always keen for detachment work; glad to help
get up a hop, go on a picnic with the ladies, romp with the
children, or sit in a game of poker. He worked hard, and he
played hard, but if he had work to do, he never let play inter-
fere with it."15

The remark about poker has a history behind it. Per-
shing was never much of a poker player before he came
to Bayard; in fact, he did not even learn the game until he
arrived there. As a boy in Laclede, Missouri, experience with
cards had been limited to an occasional game of eucre or
seven-up on rainy days, played in the barn loft with other
boys. At Bayard the officers usually played a game of poker
in the evening for moderate stakes, and Pershing looked on
occasionally, but never participated.

One evening, however, an officer was called out suddenly

14. All quotations and recollections of Mrs. Harbottle are from a tape recorded inter-
view of September 28, 1961.
15. MacAdam, World's Work, XXXVII, 290.
and asked Pershing to sit in for him. Pershing insisted that he knew nothing about the game, but the other was equally insistent. No doubt feeling that if his companion had so little regard for his own money as to entrust it to a rank novice, he deserved to lose, Pershing sat in. When the friend returned, however, he had won “a considerable sum.” Thereafter Pershing played frequently and with great interest. “I began to see poker hands in my sleep,” he confessed. This convinced him that it was about time to drop the game; after that he played rarely during the rest of his life.  

On August 11, 1887, Troop L of the 6th Cavalry was transferred to Fort Stanton. Life here was less formal than at Bayard, as the garrison was smaller, almost like one big family. Of the four years Pershing spent in New Mexico, he liked his stay at Fort Stanton best. A roommate, Julius Penn, described it as “one of the prettiest posts in the West,” the only objection being the distance (one hundred miles) from the nearest railroad and from any large town. Located near the Mescalero Apache reservation (as a precaution against the Indians), Fort Stanton was also located near excellent hunting and fishing areas. Pershing and two companions caught 24 trout in six hours one day. “We lived like Kings,” he said contentedly. “We have milk, quail, wild turkey, a wagon load of vegetables, potatoes, carrots, turnips, onions—quarts stuffed with them,—plenty of grain and hay, good water, plenty of wood, and lots of medicine, a field glass full.—I haven’t been sick yet.” Later he added: “It seems to be universal that everyone had pleasant memories of that old place [Fort Stanton]. It is unsurpassed in many things, hunting, fishing, location, and spooning.”  

While Pershing liked to hunt, it appears that he was not always successful. Mrs. Frank Lisnet, a warmhearted woman...
with a thick Irish brogue, told in later years of the time when Lieutenants Pershing, Penn, and Paddock stopped off at the Lisnet inn on a hunting trip. (A wag dubbed them "The Three Green Peas" because they were "such utter tenderfeet.") Pershing shot one of the Lisnet pigs, apparently thinking or (so he said) that it was a ferocious wild boar!

Remonstrating angrily, Mrs. Lisnet accused "Leftinant" Pershing of killing the pig deliberately, knowing it was hers, and planning to pass it off at Fort Stanton later as a wild boar. "Thim fellers at the fort'd niver know the difference," she said.

Her husband served the part of peacemaker and let Pershing off without paying for the pig. "He's a grand officer, Mary. I wouldn't give a dom' if he killed the whole herd."

Over twenty years later Pershing, now a brigadier general, again returned to the area, visiting Roswell, New Mexico, on an inspection tour. Whom should he encounter on the streets there but Mrs. Lisnet.

"How do you do, Mrs Lisnet!" he called jovially as he came up. "Remember me?"

"Sure, and that I do," was the instant reply. "Ye're the leftinant that was always killing me pigs!"

In the fall of 1887 occurred an exception to what was said above about a lack of practical training at the frontier posts of the Southwest. General Nelson A. Miles, commanding the Department of Arizona, organized practice maneuvers to teach the troops some of the craftiness, concealment, and swiftness of the Indians, and to train them in methods of pursuit and capture. While dignified with the name of "field maneuvers," they were really old-fashioned games of "cowboy and Indians," or, as the soldiers called them, "rabbit hunts." Pershing took part in them and did well. This is how the training was carried out:

One detachment was designated "the raiders"; another, "the pursuers." The raiders left at twelve noon and had an

eighteen-hour head start towards a specified post to be raided; then the pursuers set out after them. A post was considered raided if the raiders came within a thousand yards of its flagstaff in daylight without detection. Raiders were considered captured whenever a detachment of similar strength reached within hailing distance or bugle call. Posts to be raided were assigned in advance and a general route more or less prescribed, but within that limitation the raider commander had wide discretion. Defenders used heliographs, telegraphs, couriers, etc., just as they would do in pursuing Indians. When one group of pursuers tired, another took its place in the chase. Raiders, on their part, bribed citizens to make false reports of their passing, or gave out false information gratuitously, hoping it would be relayed and mislead the pursuers when the latter passed by. Raiders used old Indian tricks, like riding in stream beds to conceal their trail, or tying gunny sacks over horses' hoofs, or destroying tracks by driving herds of cattle over them. Sometimes they dropped off a trail one by one, until a very small party was being chased by the pursuers; the main contingent of raiders, meanwhile, had rendezvoused at some preappointed place.

Regardless of how the contest sounded in theory, the cards were really stacked in favor of the pursuers, as they could travel at all hours, while the raiders were limited to the period from noon to midnight. Also, the latter's line of march was more or less prescribed. Capture, then, was a foregone conclusion, as long as the trail could be followed, unless the raiders scattered so much that it was impossible to cover all the trails. On the other hand, if the pursuers spread themselves too thin in trying to cover all trails, they in turn were subject to capture if they encountered a larger body of raiders. In that case the pursuers became the pursued (as in real Indian warfare); and sometimes pursuers found their quarries after a hard ride, only to discover themselves outnumbered and therefore captured. The idea was to simulate Indian warfare, to familiarize the men with the country, to give them experience in field maneuvers, and to make
something of a game out of what was real work. Special orders were given not to break down the animals, but to bring them back after a campaign in good condition.22

At noon on September 17, 1887, Lieutenant George L. Scott, an experienced Indian fighter, rode out of Fort Stanton, leading the “raiders.” Eighteen hours later, Pershing left the fort, leading the “pursuers.” Scott was easy to follow on the first day. But instead of heading directly for his goal, Fort Bayard (west-southwest from Fort Stanton), he shrewdly veered off about forty-five degrees, heading west-northwest.

On the second day the trail was very difficult to follow. Scott was crafty. He was leading his pursuers across the malpais, an ancient stream of lava, thirty miles long and five miles wide, solidified and seamed and hard as rock. Animals left no hoof marks; it was impossible to follow a trail.

Pershing gambled on the supposition that Scott was making for San Antonio (New Mexico) and the bridge there across the Rio Grande. He abandoned the attempt to follow a trail and led his command overland to the pass in the Oscura Mountains, which lay on the direct route. They found that Scott had camped there.

Pushing on, they rode across the Jornada del Muerto (Journey of Death), a waterless, treeless plain about forty-five miles wide and 150 miles long. That night they made a dry camp. On the third day, September 20, just as Pershing rode across the bridge over the Rio Grande, he saw Scott leaving San Antonio. With a burst of speed, Pershing’s men caught the raiders a few miles west of town.23

After resting a few days at San Antonio, the roles were reversed. Pershing’s detachment became the raiders and set out with a head start for Fort Bayard on September 25. Scott’s detachment followed in pursuit eighteen hours later.

23. General Order 39, Department of Arizona, December 24, 1887, pp. 4 and 13; JJP, 315; PA, ch. iv, pp. 9-10; MacAdam, World’s Work, XXXVII, 292.
Pershing made good progress, escaping capture on the first and the second day, and covered 110 miles before he made camp in the Black Mountains northeast of Fort Bayard. The Apaches had raided through that country not too long before and the settlers were still wary of them. As Pershing was eating his field breakfast of bacon, bread, and coffee on the third day, an old prospector strolled into camp and inquired whether the presence of the soldiers meant that the Indians were on the warpath again. Pershing said no, but no sooner were the words out of his mouth than Scott's detachment hove into sight and celebrated their success by letting out a series of Indian war whoops. "Good God, Captain," exclaimed the prospector, "the Indians are on you" and he took to his heels. Scott enjoyed the incident when he rode into camp. 24

It was not inevitable that pursuers always captured raiders, though this usually occurred. Pershing missed Captain Bill Wallace's raiders completely once, but redeemed himself by capturing them a week later. 25 "Have ridden over 40 miles today," Pershing wrote from his camp at Eagle Creek, "and think that ... it will be impossible for Capt. Wallace to get his command through here, unless he scatters them like hell, and he's got to do that in the day time and I'll catch a few of them." 26

Pershing took favorably to the maneuvers and thought they were good training. His men enjoyed them, though it often meant long hours in the saddle. Once they covered 130 miles in forty hours, with seven hours in camp on the first night and only three on the second. Yet every horse and mule finished the exercise in good condition, and General Miles complimented Pershing and his men for the accomplishment. 27

The last three months of 1888 Pershing spent on leave, most of the time in Lincoln, Nebraska. There for the first
time he met William (Buffalo Bill) Cody, then, as always, memorable for his buckskin suit, broad sombrero, and prominent goatee. Later he and Pershing knew one another more intimately as aides on the staff of the State Governor. It was at Lincoln, in December, 1888, that John joined the Masonic Order.28

In January, 1889, Pershing was transferred from Fort Stanton to Fort Wingate, headquarters of the 6th Cavalry, located in northwestern New Mexico. Near the fort was a reservation of Zuñi Indians. On May, 1889, word reached the fort that the Zuñis, usually peaceable, were under arms and besieging white men at the S ranch. Pershing was ordered to take a detachment of ten men, go immediately to the ranch, and rescue the white men from the Indians.29

After a hard ride, Pershing's detachment saw a little clearing surrounded by about one hundred Indians firing a steady fusillade at a log cabin in the center. Pershing rode up and hailed the Indians. They were greatly excited and angry. The white men in the cabin, they explained, had tried to steal a herd of the Zuñi horses, and, being discovered, had killed some of their people in a running fight; the Indians were determined to take the murderers dead or alive.

Pershing, for his part, explained his orders to rescue the white men and bring them back under arrest to Fort Wingate. It was no easy task to persuade the Zuñi chiefs to permit this; to see known thieves and killers ride off safely and unpunished was not according to their Indian code of swift justice. For a moment it looked as if an attempt to remove the white men would bring on a clash with the Zuñis. But the chiefs finally agreed reluctantly and ordered the fusillade against the cabin stopped.

Pershing's next task was to get the white men inside to

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29. S. O. 2, District of New Mexico, January 12, 1889, JJP, 315; Orders No. 85, Fort Wingate, New Mexico, May 9, 1889, JJP, 315.
surrender their arms and accompany him in arrest back to Fort Wingate. He walked to the cabin, demanded their guns, and assured them of his protection against the hostile Zuñis. His assurances must have seemed pretty weak to the thoroughly frightened prisoners; they saw one hundred armed and angry Indians arrayed against only ten American soldiers. But, as they were doomed inevitably if they stayed where they were, they decided to take their chances with Pershing.

The critical stage, of course, was when they all stepped outside to pass through the crowd of Zuñis who gathered around threateningly. There was no telling when some young, hot-blooded buck would pump a bullet into their midst, and what wild melee would follow if that happened—one shot liable to touch off a general engagement! Pershing knew that the escape must be done quickly, with efficiency, and with no show of fear. On the way in he had said to one of his men, "We are going to take those men away and if these bucks get hostile remember we mean business." He gave an example of a "cool head" now. He put the prisoners on a buckboard, mounted his men on either side, and road through the lines of threatening braves. There were no shots fired and the detachment reached Fort Wingate safely. 30

Colonel Carr, commanding Fort Wingate, commended Pershing for successfully handling a touchy assignment. Pershing appreciated the commendation, but must have wondered afterwards if Indian justice was not better, after all, than white man justice. Of the three horse thieves and murderers, one escaped from the guard house, and the other two were later released without punishment. 31

In September, 1889, Pershing was transferred back to Fort Stanton, his favorite post. "Everything lovely here," he reported. "Kingsbury's wife among the loveliest—She is not pretty, but as nice as she can be,—great addition to the

30. PA, ch. iv, p. 12; MacAdam, World's Work, XXXVII, 293; D. J. Dolson to Pershing, October 22, 1906, JJP, 281.
31. PA, ch. iv, p. 12; Col. Eugene A. Carr's efficiency report on Pershing, May 1, 1890 (NA), filed with 3849 A. C. P. 86.
regiment—Paddock and I live at the same old places—We had our sisters out to see us last Month [Richard B. Paddock married John's sister, Grace, eighteen months later]—We turned the post upside down.—I went to El Paso with the girls—Mr. and Mrs. Cockrill were there—We had a great time—"  

At Fort Stanton, Pershing fulfilled a promise he had made before to Colonel Carr. The latter was very fond of hunting, especially for bears, which were plentiful near Fort Wingate. Pershing had mentioned once that a family living near there specialized in training dogs for bear hunting. When Pershing was ordered back to Fort Stanton, Carr asked him to buy one of these dogs and ship it to him. This he did. Spending fifty dollars of Colonel Carr's money, he purchased what the sellers called a "wonder," had him carefully crated, and sent him to Carr at Wingate. Carr, in turn, then organized a bear hunt, inviting some of his staff, and promised good sport and a bear meat feast—all because of the new dog which Pershing had bought.

The hunt began and before long a bear was spied. The dog was brought forward, took one look at his adversary (standing on its hind legs and roaring ferociously), turned tail, and ran all the way back to the post. It was a long time before Pershing heard the end of that incident.

Despite this, Colonel Carr gave Pershing a good rating on the efficiency report he wrote in 1890:

professional ability: most excellent
attention to duty: most excellent
general conduct and habits: most excellent
condition and discipline of men under his immediate control: 
  most excellent
his care and attention to their welfare: most excellent
any particular fitness or marked ability for college, recruiting
  or other detail: Yes, for a college detail.

32. Pershing to Julius Penn, November 24, 1889, JJP, 282.
33. PA, ch. iv, p. 15.
34. Carr's efficiency report on Pershing, May 1, 1890.
Colonel Carr commended Pershing for two other qualities in this report. One was "studious habits." The first published article of Pershing's career had appeared in the *Journal of the U.S. Cavalry Association* the year before. In September, 1889, he asked to attend the infantry and cavalry school at Fort Leavenworth and was recommended by Colonel Carr, but did not get the assignment. Denied this, on his own Pershing undertook a reading program covering the cavalry, modern tactics reconnaissance, topography, and the campaigns of the Civil War. He wrote Julius Penn at Fort Leavenworth, requesting him to forward the whole course as taught there "from first to last." 35

The other point for which Pershing was commended was his "great interest in rifle, carbine, and pistol practice." He had ranked as a "Marksman" in the 1887 competitions, and as a "Sharpshooter" during the following two years. In 1890 he ranked as "Marksman" again, and in 1891 as "Distinguished Marksman." Pershing's own interest in straight shooting was contagious. More than once he took a group which stood low or last in target practice, and by his instruction and his own enthusiasm, raised it to the top of the regiment. His emphasis on accurate shooting was to be life-long. 36

Pershing's happy stay at Fort Stanton was threatened in August, 1890, by a department order dissolving Troop L (his troop). Fearing lest his assignment to a new troop would mean his being assigned to a different post, John wrote his regimental commander, Colonel Carr, asking to be assigned to Troop D (also stationed at Fort Stanton). Troop D had an officer shortage, said Pershing, solicitously. Colonel Carr forwarded John's request to the Department Commander with an interesting comment on human motivation: "Respectfully forwarded. Disapproved. This officer wrote me a private letter saying that he had invested in mines near Fort Stan-

35. John J. Pershing, "Competitions for 1889," *Journal of the U.S. Cavalry Association,* II (December, 1889), 420; Col. Eugene A. Carr to the Adjutant General of the Army, February 17, 1889 (NA), 1015 A. C. P. 89; Pershing's own efficiency report on himself, May 1, 1890 (NA), 3849 A. G. O. 86; Pershing to Penn, November 10, 1890, JJP, 282.

36. PA, ch. iv, p. 12; marksman certificates in JJP, 315.
ton, and wanted to remain there to look after his interests. I replied that I wished him success in his financial enterprises; but that they should not interfere with his duties.” Colonel Carr recommended that Pershing be transferred to Troop A (stationed at Fort Wingate). 37

To Fort Wingate then went Pershing. “Well, I am back here again, ‘L’ troop having ascended,” he wrote Julius Penn on September 30, 1890. “This post is a S. O. B. and no question,—tumbled down, old quarters, though Stots [Lt. John M. Stotsenburg] is repairing as fast as he can. The winters are severe,—It is always bleak and the surrounding country is barren absolutely—”

He also chided his friend in the same letter, showing a sense of humor which, in later life, few people suspected he had. “I have not heard from you for some time. . . . And I have been asked by several people if you were not dead—the rumor having got around some way—I have not heard of your demise, nor seen your obituary. . . . Let me hear from you.” 38

In late October an old friend arrived at Fort Wingate—Chauncey Baker, class of ’86, U.S. Military Academy. With him came Brigadier General Alexander McG. McCook and Thomas J. Morgan (respectively Commander of the Department of Arizona and U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs), on their way to visit the Navaho and Hopi reservations. Pershing was detailed to escort them with a small detachment.

At Keams Canyon, New Mexico, a large number of Indians assembled to meet the General and the Indian Commissioner; they celebrated the meeting by holding athletic contests in the afternoon—footraces, horseraces (they ran a winning horse repeatedly, until he was worn out), and wrestling. Chauncey Baker, a great teaser, told the Indians that Pershing was a champion wrestler, and the latter soon found he had a challenge on his hands. Not trusting his wrestling

37. Pershing to the Assistant Adjutant General, Department of Arizona, August 20, 1890, and Col. Eugene A. Carr’s endorsement on this letter, August 22, 1890, JJP, 315.
38. Pershing to Julius Penn, September 30, 1890, JJP, 282.
prowess in an engagement with some powerful brave, he excused himself by saying that he was a runner, not a wrestler. That was all right with the Indians. They promptly put their champion runner up against him. Caught and unable to back out without losing face, Pershing stripped down to about as little clothing as the Indian, and made ready for the race.

The distance was stepped off, Chauncey Baker and an old Indian chief were selected as judges, and bets were placed. The Indians wagered heavily on their man and the small group of white soldiers backed Pershing with their money. When the starting signal was given, both men dashed off and were even for about the first fifty yards. After that Pershing slowly pulled away and ended several paces ahead, winning the race.39

His finish was rather unorthodox. He had a trick ankle due to a sprain at West Point and, as he neared the finish line, his ankle gave out, so that he rolled rather than ran across the finish line. But the Indians made no difficulty about the form of the finish and conceded that the white man had won. They offered a rematch, which Pershing prudently declined.40

On November 23, 1890, the 6th Cavalry received orders to prepare to move north. Trouble had broken out in South Dakota. Some three thousand Indians from the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Reservations had fled from their homes and taken refuge in the Badlands. They were well armed and had posted themselves on a high mesa, inaccessible except by a few miles and by a wagon road. There they waited the appearance of an Indian “Messiah,” who would make them immune to soldiers’ bullets and lead them in retaking their lands from the whites and in driving the latter from the country. To the North, on the Cheyenne and Standing Rock Reservations, other Indians were preparing to join their com-

39. Same to same, November 10, 1890; PA, ch. iv, pp. 17-18.
rades in the Badlands. A full-scale Indian uprising was in the offing. 41

The 6th Cavalry left New Mexico on December 1 and detrained in Rapid City, South Dakota, on December 9. There they waited for their winter clothing—so different from what they had been used to in the sunny Southwest—fur-lined caps and gloves, heavy felt socks, blanket-lined canvas overcoats, arctic overshoes. These issued, they were in the saddle and riding to quash what was to be the last great Indian uprising in the United States.

Their aim was to throw a cordon of troops around the Badlands, prevent new bands from joining the other renegades, and starve those inside into submission. They were "almost constantly in the saddle," Pershing recalled, "patrolling and scouting in every direction." 42 It was bitter winter and they were outside all the time. Old campaigners of the Civil War declared that from the standpoint of physical endurance the campaign in the Badlands of Dakota was the hardest they had ever gone through. Snow, sleet, and wind, ice in the rivers which had to be forded on horseback, hurried and forced marches, each night a new camp and not always in tents, the weather generally freezing and often below zero, sleeping with their clothes on, bathing only occasionally, always on the alert, always riding to investigate a rumor, troops split up and isolated, and always the possibility of a massacre—such was the campaign of the Ghost Dance Rebellion, as it came to be called. 43

Men let their beards grow long as protection against the cold, and their appetites grew in proportion to their beards. Pershing's became "enormous." Breakfast was a large pie plate heaped with bacon, beans and hardbread and washed down with a quart of steaming coffee; lunch, whatever could be stuffed into the saddle bags and eaten on the way; supper, heaps of beef, potatoes, and other substantially. "I could not

41. Carter, pp. 256-57; PA, ch. v (June, 1936), pp. 1-5, JJP, 380.
42. PA, ch. v, pp. 5-6; MacAdam, World's Work, XXXVII, 293.
43. MacAdam, World's Work, XXXVII (February, 1919), 451 and 458.
now eat in four days what I did then in one,” Pershing said later, and the twenty pounds he gained in two months seemed to prove him right. But he was solid and hardy and in fighting trim at the end of that campaign.  

On Christmas day they received bad news: Big Foot’s band (many of whom had been in on the kill at Custer’s Last Stand and who had never been tamed) had escaped the 8th Cavalry and were headed south. Could the 6th Cavalry intercept them and cut them off before they united and consolidated with other Indians?

A much-used trail passed down Porcupine Creek to the South. Pershing suggested to Major Emil Adams, the squadron commander, that Big Foot would probably come that way. Adam disagreed and posted soldiers on another trail a few miles west. “But for fate,” Pershing complained afterwards, “the 6th Cavalry would have captured Big Foot’s band. . . . [We] were in camp—the whole battalion—on White River when Big Foot crossed four miles below us. Had the usual scouting party been sent out next day, his trail would have been cut and he would have been our bacon; or had the previous days [sic] march been shorter as we all tried to persuade Adam to make it, we would have cut the trail the succeeding day. Possibly its [sic] lucky we did not get him, but I regard it as unlucky.”

Big Foot slipped through on the trail Pershing had wanted to watch, but was picked up and captured on December 28th by another squadron. Then, just as they all thought affairs would be settled without bloodshed, came a clash at Wounded Knee Creek to the south, leaving over two hundred casualties. “This came like a thunder-bolt,” said Pershing, “as the troops thought by that time that the campaign was going to be ended peaceably.” After this, they felt constant fear that some isolated cavalry unit would be surprised and wiped out by overwhelming numbers.

44. PA, ch. v, p. 8.
45. Ibid., p. 6; Pershing to Julius Penn, February 14, 1891, JJP, 282.
46. PA, ch. v, p. 7.
The only encounter Pershing’s troop took part in after the news of Wounded Knee Creek was on January 1, 1891. A reconnaissance troop was attacked while crossing the White River and partially surrounded. Two men, greatly excited, rushed into camp with the alarm. “Boots and Saddles” (the emergency bugle call) was sounded, and two troops (one was Pershing’s) rode out at top speed to the rescue. But before they got there, another cavalry squadron, attracted by the shooting, had come to the scene and had begun to drive the Indians off. Pershing arrived only in time to see the Indians disappear.47

After several weeks of guarding hostile groups and parleying with them, the troops had a respite. The Messiah craze subsided and the Indians consented to return to their reservations. The troops went into camp at Pine Ridge, South Dakota. Here was relaxation after a hard campaign, meeting with old friends, swapping yarns, and bringing one another up to date on the last five years since leaving West Point. Eight members of the class of ’86 held a pleasant reunion. “It would have been more pleasant,” said Pershing, “had two or three or four of the boys not gotten a little too full, one of whom I am which—I never went to a reunion yet that I did not wind up full as eighteen goats.”48

On January 22, 1891, General Miles held a grand review of all the troops which had participated in the campaign. Although not a relatively large number of men, the review comprised the largest body of troops any of the participants had ever seen at any one place. Pershing felt the Indians must have been glad they had surrendered without a full-scale war.49

After the review, all left for their respective stations except the 6th Cavalry, which remained behind a few more weeks to handle some troublesome Indians. Then orders came, assigning five troops of the 6th (including Pershing’s Troop

47. Ibid.; Col. Eugene A. Carr to the Assistant Adjutant General, Department of the Platte, April 20, 1891, JJP, 369.
48. Pershing to Penn, February 14, 1891, JJP, 282 (ms. copy).
49. PA, ch. v, p. 8.
A) to Fort Niobrara, Nebraska, just south of the Rosebud Reservation.

Halfway, at Crookston, although there was a little indication of trouble, an old ranchman warned them. "You'd better get into camp soon," he said; "a blizzard's coming!" The air was absolutely still; there was no sign of a storm. They asked the man how he knew. He was not the arguing kind. "This mist isn't in the air for nothing. I've lived out in this country long enough to know what it means. I tell you a blizzard's coming and you'd better get into camp."

The troops obeyed immediately, and not any too soon. The sky darkened, the wind whipped up, and a cold gale blew in from the northwest, carrying snowflakes. Just before the blizzard broke, Pershing came into Sergeant Stevenson's tent, telling him to have his men commandeer some railroad ties for firewood. "Tell your men to tie towels over their mouths and noses before they go out," he said; "otherwise, they won't be able to get their breath in the wind." "That's the sort of an officer Pershing was," Stevenson recalled. "Always thinking about his men, and that's why the men would do anything for him." 50

Pershing stayed at Fort Niobrara only long enough to refit, from February 2 to March 1, 1891. Then he was sent to Pine Ridge, South Dakota, to take charge of a company of Sioux Indian Scouts. There were four companies of these, of about fifty men each, hired by the government at the regular pay for cavalry. Their job was to go wherever disaffection was suspected, watch for gun running and inter-tribal conspiracies, smooth over trouble, and act as go-betweens for the government and the Indians. They were to keep their pulse on Indian affairs, so that an uprising such as had occurred could immediately be detected and checked, or—better—so that discontent would never reach the revolt stage. 51

This was Pershing's first experience in handling men not

50. Ibid., p. 9; Mac Adam, World's Work, XXXVII, 459.
51. Pershing to the Adjutant General's Office, June 1, 1891 (NA), 3871 A. C. P. 91, filed with 3849 A. C. P. 86; AP, ch. v, pp. 9-10; Mac Adam, World's Work, XXXVII, 460.
of his own race and culture. He succeeded in this, just as he succeeded later in his relations with American Negroes and with Philippine Moros. Part of his success may have been due to certain temperamental gifts; some men are naturally adept at getting along with men of different races, while other men botch and blunder and make a mess of things, even when best intentioned. But part of the secret may have been that Sioux Indians, American Negroes, and Philippine Moros, Pershing acted as man to man. He treated them all with a certain fundamental respect as human beings and bore them a sincere friendliness as people. He did not tolerate them; he liked them. And almost universally they liked him in return.

More than once a Sioux Scout appointed himself Pershing’s personal bodyguard when they were in dangerous territory. When Pershing visited Wounded Knee Creek, for instance, he saw Indians with “bad hearts” prowling about, wrapped heavily in blankets with hatchets underneath, waiting the chance to avenge themselves on a white man. At night, therefore, a Sioux Scout, unbidden, placed himself outside Pershing’s tent, watching carefully as he smoked his pipe that no one approached in the dark to do his commander harm. Even in daylight, when Pershing left the tent, another Scout, without orders, followed closely as a bodyguard. Every time Pershing moved, there was a Scout on his trail.52

Compared to the normal army roster, the Scout muster roll was a galaxy of strange names: Thunder Bull, Red Feather, Big Charger, Black Fox, Broken Leg, Crow-on-head, Has-white-face-horse, Yellow Bull, Wounded Horse, Kills Alone, and so on. The Scouts were generally well behaved, though some became unruly from too much drink. When this happened, their non-commissioned officers disciplined them without instructions from Pershing. These officers were selected from those of highest tribal rank, lest any chief’s son be

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52. PA, ch. v, p. 11; MacAdam, World’s Work, XXXVII, 460.

Two months before Pershing’s service began, a lieutenant had been murdered while visiting a hostile camp.
subjected to the indignity of being under orders from a com-
mon brave. 53

The Sioux Scouts were enrolled for only six months and
were not asked to re-enlist. Pershing always felt that this was
a mistake. The Sioux were natural soldiers. They sent out
flankers and advance guards with a sureness and naturalness
that was instinctive; they approached the crest of each hill
cautiously, prepared for a possible enemy just over the top;
they would never allow themselves to blunder into a trap.
Why not enroll a regiment or two of Indians in the Regular
Army, wondered Pershing? It had been done with Negroes
with good success. It would bind them to the government and
exercise an influence on the others (through their own
soldiers) which would otherwise be lacking. Unfortunately,
the Sioux Scouts went out of existence soon after Pershing’s
service with them ended. 54

This occurred on July 24, 1891. His days as a young
frontier cavalryman were over. Ahead of him lay the Spanish-
American War and San Juan Hill, service in the Philippines
among the Moros of Mindanao, chasing Pancho Villa among
the foothills of Mexico, commanding the A.E.F. in France.
His brilliant career was to lead him to the highest honors
America has ever conferred upon any of her military sons: General of the Armies of the United States. He is equivalently
the only six star general in our history.

53. PA, ch. v, pp. 10-11.
54. Ibid., pp. 11-12.