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World War I Hero Charles Whittlesey Death Still a Mystery

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One of the most famous American war heroes of World War I was Major Charles Whittlesey of the U.S. Army, who led over 550 American troops into the Argonne

Forest after breaking through the German line during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive of Oct 2, 1918. The men, dubbed as “The Lost Battalion” by the press at the time, were surrounded by the Germans and their supplies were cut off. They fought and held off the Germans for almost a week without adequate food and supplies until runners from the south led advancing Allies to relieve them. After the battle, Whittlesey was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and was sent back to the U.S. on October 29. Over a month later, he and his subordinates, Capts. George McMurtry and Nelson Holderman, received the Medal of Honor for their service and heroic acts from President Woodrow Wilson. Even though Whittlesey was praised as a war hero in the States, his death still holds some mystery among war historians.

According to The Charley Project, a website that contains over 9,000 cold missing persons cases, mostly from the U.S., on Nov 26, 1921, Whittlesey had dinner with the ship’s captain on the *USS Toloa* as it traveled from New York to Havana, Cuba. Around 11:15 p.m., after chatting with a couple of passengers about his experience in the war, Whittlesey excused himself from the smoking room to go to bed. He was never seen or heard from again.

No one knows exactly what happened. The Monday Evening Club stated on their blog in 2009 that Whittlesey had placed nine envelopes on his bed, which contained letters addressed to his family, close friends and the captain. He then, according to the site, walked to the deck and leaned dangerously over the rail. He then used an army-issue pistol to shoot himself in the head, after which he “fell into the dark sea.” However, no one had reported a gunshot or witnessed Whittlesey falling off the ship. The letters do not reveal his true motives or the reason for his “disappearance.”

WorldWar1.com speculated on the mystery of the death of Whittlesey, saying he may have been driven to severe depression by the “constant reminders of the destruction” of the battle during World War I. Some people think that guilt drove him to suicide. During the battle in the Argonne Forest, he gave the wrong coordinates to the American artillery which hailed “friendly fire” among his troops. He had refused to surrender to the Germans when the enemy called them out, which led to further casualties among his men. However, some people believed that his inability to adapt to civilian life caused him to commit suicide. He was constantly called to speak about his experience during the war between 1919 and 1920, which may have made him feel extremely uncomfortable. Whatever the reason may be, the evidence shows that “Whittlesey’s death was indirectly related to the unhappiness which befell him after his experiences in the War.”



Charles Whittlesey, played by actor Rick Schroder, inspects his troops before assaulting the German line in “The Lost Battalion.”

Whittlesey was quite a different man before he enlisted in the Army. Born in Florence, Wisconsin, on Jan 20, 1884, his family moved to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in 1894 where he grew up and graduated from Pittsfield High School in 1901. The Monday Evening Club mused that in 1904, Whittlesey wrote that the purpose of a college education is “learning to judge correctly, to think clearly, to see and to know the truth, and to attain the faculty of pure delight in the beautiful.” He earned a law degree from Harvard in 1908 and soon after, formed a practice with a classmate in New York City. A month after the U.S. entered World War I, Whittlesey quit his practice and enlisted in the Army, where fate eventually led him to the events of “The Lost Battalion.”

After the war, journalists besieged Whittlesey with questions about the battle, and the public wanted to hear his tales of heroism. He could not return to his quiet law practice with his business partner. He was in high demand like a film celebrity. He visited the wounded in hospitals in New York and delivered eulogies at funerals of those who served in the Great War. He also attended the first New York State convention of the American Legion in Rochester and was a high-profile supporter of the New York City Red Cross. The Monday Evening Club quoted Whittlesey as complaining to a friend, “Not a day goes by but I hear from some of my old outfit, usually about some sorrow or misfortune. I cannot bear much more.”

Over 90 years later, the mystery behind the death of Whittlesey is still recognized by World War I historians. To the public, he is mostly forgotten. Whittlesey was never married or had any children. However, he was portrayed in the 2001 film “The Lost Battalion” by actor Rick Schroder, which portrayed the hellish week in the Argonne Forest. Although his body was never found, a headstone was made for him in a cemetery at Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

By Nick Ng

Sources:

[The Charley Project](#)
[The Monday Evening Club](#)
[WorldWar1.com](#)
[Historyofwar.org](#)
[Find a Grave](#)