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Contributed by Beth Sternhagen & family
Thanks, Beth, for sending this in!

Florence Native Commanded Famed Lost Battalion in World War I



Maj. Charles Whittlesey

FLORENCE "GREATEST HERO"

By Melvin M. Parrish

A great clergyman once said, "War is a science of destruction." True but it also produces heroes. No soldier in the annals of American military history reached such prominence than Major Charles White Whittlesey, when he faced the enemy and almost annihilation during the waning months of World War I.

Born January 20, 1884 in Florence, Wisconsin, a small community nestled on the northeastern border of the state, it was noted for its friendly people, iron mines and logging industry. Whittlesey first became interested in law after graduating from Williams College in 1905. In 1908 he earned his law degree from Harvard and moved to New York, where he became assistant in a law firm. Three years later he formed a partnership with John B. Pruyn, a New York attorney. Whittlesey was regarded as a gentle, soft spoken kind of person. Somewhat of a pacifist. Tall and trim, he wore rimless glasses and his involvement in the great European War came about by a strict sense of duty.

Shortly after his enlistment in 1917, Whittlesey was commissioned Captain in the 308th Infantry Regiment of the 77th Division. Arriving in France in 1918 his division took part in some minor operations until late September when the final Allied push for victory against Germany began the Meuse-Argonne offensive. It was the last major obstacle to winning the war. The Germans had fortified their positions in the sector so strong it was impregnable. The high ground and thick forests covering the area was filled with heavy guns, barbed wire, machine gun emplacements and booby traps. For four years the sector had been in German hands with little harrassment.

The British, Belgians, French and Americans advanced along a 256 mile front from Flanders to Derdun to smash the Hindenburg Line. The American section was the Argonne and by October 1, the 77th Division had reached a point northeast of Binarville.

Major Whittlesey was then ordered for-ward. With approximately 800 men he crashed through the German line and was soon isolated from other regiments held in check by the enemy. His position was critical and the Germans had practically surrounded his detachment. For five days and nights, his command fought off repeated attacks which diminished his ranks, and having no communication with his rear became erroneously named "the Lost Battalion."

As one Yank remarked later: "We knew where we were, but so did the Germans."

With a limited supply of ammunition on hand, and food rations almost

exhausted they held on.

On the fourth day the French became convinced that the battalion had been wiped out or surrendered and placed artillery fire on the position. Two aviators lost their lives attempting to drop the needed supplies to his men. Realizing time was running out for Whittlesey and his group, a German officer requested they surrender. He knew further blood shed could be prevented. Major Whittlesey politely refused. Soon the German opposition began to weaken. A determined assault was made east of his position. It was successful.

At 3:00 p.m., on October 7, Major Whittlesey assembled his group at the foot of a hill and began to trudge back to his lines for food and a much needed rest. There were 194 survivors able to walk.

The Major was promoted to lieutenant colonel a few days later, and at the close of the war was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. He resumed his law practice in New York, and participated in many post-war movements, became a dedicated worker in every cause affecting the disabled soldiers. He was called upon constantly to address clubs, luncheons and various other functions relating experiences of the "Lost Battalion." He made his last public appearance November 11, 1921; he served as one of the pallbearers at the interment of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.

For some unknown reason he apparently thought he was at guilt for all the lives lost in his detachment and entered a mood of depression. On Thanksgiving Day, he boarded a liner for a holiday cruise to Havana. That evening he sat in the saloon and chatted with several other passengers. He left at 11:15 p.m., stating he was retiring. He never reached his cabin. Sometime between that time and 8:00 a.m., the following morning he had disappeared over the side, an apparant suicide.

He refused to take the credit for all the brave and heroic acts during the epic of the battle of the Meuse-Argonne. He told a reporter after the conflict: "Write about them, not me."