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# **THE MONDAY EVENING CLUB**

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## **Missing in Action: Charles W. Whittlesey's farewell**



*Presented to the Club on May 14, 2001 by Martin C. Langeveld*

Late at night on Saturday, November 26, 1921, the SS *Tolosa*, a United Fruit Company liner, steamed south on the Atlantic, a half-day out of New York and bound for Havana. Charles White Whittlesey, a Wall Street lawyer, had spent the

evening in the ship's smoking saloon, conversing with fellow passengers about his wartime experiences. A half-hour before midnight, he abruptly excused himself. In his cabin, he placed on the bedspread nine letters in envelopes, along with a note for the captain. Then he stepped on deck, leaned precariously over the rail, shot himself in the head with an army-issue pistol, and fell into the dark sea.

Whittlesey, 37 years old, was considered one of the greatest American heroes of the First World War. In fact, the press had proclaimed his principal military exploit to be as memorable as Custer's Last Stand or the defense of the Alamo.

During the Meuse-Argonne offensive in October 1918, he had led a unit of American troops that became known as the "Lost Battalion" when they were marooned for five days without food or water behind German lines, constantly under attack. On the final day of the ordeal, the German commander demanded that Whittlesey and his troops surrender, "as it would be quite useless to resist any more." The story went out that in response he told them, "Go to hell," which made him an instant celebrity, but afterward he steadfastly maintained that he had sent no answer. For refusing to retreat or surrender, Whittlesey received decorations ranging from the Congressional Medal of Honor to a citation from the king of Montenegro.

When the news of his disappearance reached New York, it immediately became the top story in every newspaper in the city.

All the recipients of Whittlesey's final letters maintained he had offered no explanation for his suicide, and none of the letters were released to the press. As a footnote, months later, his estate was appraised at a net value of only \$680, including \$200 in clothing and a \$40 watch. America's fascination with Whittlesey's suicide faded quickly, and his motives remain a mystery.

The Whittleseys, a family with colonial Connecticut origins, were keenly aware of their role in history and pursued a mission of leadership that encouraged service to God, country and society. Between 1776 and 1900, the Whittleseys, typically

educated at Yale, supplied the nation with one Senator, four Congressmen, dozens of state legislators, and many ministers, lawyers, merchants and military officers.

Charles Whittlesey grew up in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and chose to attend Williams College. [Incidentally, his family came to Pittsfield because Charles' uncle William Augustus Whittlesey had moved here. William Augustus was a member of this Club, the first of several connections the story has to us. Also of interest, William Augustus had married Caroline Benton Tilden, the niece of Samuel Tilden, whose story Club member Roger Linscott presented at an earlier meeting this season.] At 6 feet, 2 inches, he towered over his college classmates, but his eyes were poor and he was never seen with a ball in his hands. Quiet, studious, and inclined toward literature and poetry, he preferred, instead of sports, long solitary walks through the Berkshire Hills, studying nature and watching birds. He flirted with socialism and youthful idealism, writing in 1904 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 embarked on a Wall Street law career, soon forming a partnership with a Williams classmate, John Bayard Pruyn.

A month after America entered the war in 1917, Whittlesey took a leave from the partnership and enlisted in the Army. He shipped for France as a captain in the Army's 77th Division, also known as the "metropolitan division," because it was made up largely of New York City men, principally from the polyglot lower east side of Manhattan. Its members spoke 42 different languages or dialects.

By September, Whittlesey was commissioned a major. General John J. "Blackjack" Pershing, the commander-in-chief of the American forces, was gambling that he could smash the German lines sufficiently to induce a retreat by committing relatively green troops to battle. The alternative was to have his army suffer attrition by disease during the French winter in order to await a spring offensive. He planned to have the Americans launch a massive attack in the

Meuse-Argonne region.

On the morning of October 2, the 77th was ordered to move forward against the heavily fortified German line. Whittlesey's troops, a mixed battalion of 554 men, advanced through a ravine in the heart of the Argonne forest, an "almost impenetrable jungle of undergrowth." Because the units on their flanks failed to make headway, Whittlesey's troops were cut off from their supply lines the next day, pinned down by German fire from the surrounding 200-foot high bluffs. They began to suffer heavy losses.

Some of the men had never thrown a live grenade, but for four days, they resisted waves of Germans attacks. The Americans quickly ran out of rations, and had only the water they could scoop out of puddles.

Based on messages Whittlesey sent by carrier pigeon, his sole means of communications, Allied aircraft tried to drop supplies, but because of the narrowness of the strip held by the battalion, none of the parcels hit their mark. American artillery fire directed at the German positions fell instead on Whittlesey's troops, and he had to send out his last pigeon with a message demanding, "for heaven's sake stop it."

On the afternoon of Oct. 7, the Germans pushed a blindfolded American prisoner, Lowell Hollingshead, back across the lines blindfolded to deliver a typewritten message to Whittlesey. In perfect English, it suggested:

The suffering of your wounded men can be heard over here in the German lines, and we are appealing to your humane sentiments to stop. A white flag shown by one of your men will tell us that you agree with these conditions. Please treat Private Lowell R. Hollingshead as an honorable man. He is quite a soldier. We envy you. The German Commanding Officer.

(The writer, it turned out after the war, had lived before the war in Spokane, Washington for four years.)

After the troops were rescued, a war correspondent asked Gen. Robert Alexander

of the 77th Division how Whittlesey had answered the German demand. Alexander replied, "What answer could he send them? He told them to go to hell." That response turned the the "Lost Battalion" into one of the biggest stories of the war, and made Whittlesey one of its most sought-after heroes.

In reality, Whittlesey had simply read the note aloud to his subordinates, smiled, and put it in his pocket. He told Hollingshead, "Go back to your post." He sent no reply to the Germans, but decided to pull in the white sheets that served as targets for the airplanes, for fear that they would be seen as signals of surrender.

Relief came at last that night, when a fellow regiment of the 77th fought their way to Whittlesey's position. Of the original 554 troops involved, 107 had been killed, 63 were missing and 190 were wounded. Only 194 were able to walk out of the ravine. Along the entire Meuse-Argonne front, 1,200,000 American troops had taken part, sustaining 117,000 casualties. But the offensive had more than met Pershing's expectations, inducing the Germans to agree to the Armistice on November 11.

Whittlesey received a battlefield promotion to Lieutenant Colonel, and a few weeks later he was relieved from further combat duty and sent back to America. In New York, reporters besieged him, and he obligingly answered their questions, embellishing his tale with quotable lines like, "hundreds of Germans attacking with hand grenades and howling like 10,000 wild devils all day." On December 6th, President Wilson announced that of the first three Congressional Medals of Honor to be awarded for valor in the war, one would go Whittlesey and another to his second-in-command George McMurtry.

After telling his war story a few times, Whittlesey accepted speaking invitations, but steadfastly refused to discuss his war experiences, both in public and in private. But he hadn't lost the idealism that had turned him to socialism before the war. He spoke of pacifism, and in favor of the proposed League of Nations and its promise of a lasting peace. He consistently spotlighted the valor of the American enlisted men, saying "remember that those who have been picked out

for special praise are the symbols of the men behind them. No man ever does anything alone. It's the chaps you don't hear about that make possible the deed you do hear about.”

He tried to return to his quiet law partnership with Bayard Pruyn, but the nation would not leave him alone. The hero's role, which Whittlesey played willingly at first, demanded much of his time. He took to visiting the wounded recuperating in hospitals in the New York area, and delivered eulogies at funerals of servicemen he had known. In June 1919, he accepted honorary degrees at both Harvard and Williams. He marched with other servicemen in a July 4 “Welcome Home” parade in his home town, Pittsfield. He attended the first New York State convention of the American Legion in Rochester, and became active in the Roll Call, the annual membership drive supporting the New York City Red Cross.

Behind the public's admiration for Whittlesey, however, there were disquieting whispers – suggestions that he had led his troops into an avoidable trap; that he had not properly followed orders; that he could have avoided casualties by surrendering or ordering a retreat; that he had given the wrong coordinates in his pigeon message calling for artillery support.

Military historians have exonerated Whittlesey, but whether he blamed himself or not, the level of casualties his unit sustained weighed heavily on his mind. And rather than diminish over time, Whittlesey's role as a hero seemed to demand more and more. To a friend he complained, “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.”

In pursuit of his special interest in banking law, in 1920 Whittlesey joined White & Case, a large firm with many banking clients – but the pace of his public appearances continued unabated. He made whistle-stop speeches favoring America's entry into the League of Nations on behalf of the losing presidential candidate that year, Ohio governor James M. Cox. He stayed in the army reserves, where he was promoted to Colonel in 1921. He appeared, briefly, in a

movie, "The Lost Battalion," released in 1921, the principal action of which was romantic rather than military. In the fall of 1921, he served as chairman of the Red Cross Roll Call. Finally, on November 11, 1921, Armistice Day, when the nation buried the Unknown Soldier of the World War at Arlington National Cemetery, Whittlesey and McMurtry both participated as pallbearers.

Friends and relatives noticed that in the weeks after that culminating event, he seemed moody and depressed. He was also physically ill with a racking cough that kept him up at night, and was heard by others in his rooming house. To a fellow boarder, but not to anyone else, he casually mentioned the possibility of taking a sea trip to get away from things. After speaking at a Red Cross dinner, he confided to his dinner partner: "Raking over the ashes like this revives all the horrible memories. I'll hear the wounded screaming again. I have nightmares about them. I can't remember when I had a good night's sleep."

Unknown to all, but with all the thoroughness natural to him as a corporate lawyer, during those same weeks Whittlesey was meticulously preparing for his end, leaving no detail to chance.

At the end of October, he visited his family in Pittsfield for the last time.

On Friday, November 18th, he walked to the American Express office around the corner from his office to book a passage to Havana. From a chart, he selected a starboard cabin from which it was possible to slip easily, and unseen, to the upper promenade deck. To avoid easy recognition he used the name "C. W. Whittlesey."

His father came to New York to see him that weekend, and later said that his son was in high spirits. On Sunday evening, seated on stage among crippled and wounded war veterans, Whittlesey appeared at a New York gathering honoring Marshall Ferdinand Foch, the Allied Commander-in-Chief.

On Wednesday, the 23rd, he dictated a new will, had it witnessed, and placed it in a bank safe-deposit box. To the stenographer and witnesses, this was normal –

lawyers at the firm were always making new wills.

The next day was Thanksgiving. He visited his closest friends, the Pruyns. By all accounts, he was unusually cheerful, and played with their year-old baby during most of the visit.

On Friday, the 25th, before leaving his office for the last time, he wrote out detailed instructions for handling the cases he was working on. He told associates he would be away for the weekend – some thought he would be visiting his parents in Pittsfield, but he told others he planned to attend the Army-Navy football game on Saturday.

Instead, he went to a theater performance Friday evening with a woman friend, and asked Mrs. Gertrude Sullivan, his landlady, to have his breakfast ready at 8 a.m., telling her, “I’m going to be alone for a few days. I am tired.” In the morning he gave her a check for the December rent, urging her to cash it. The *Toloa* left the dock about noon on Saturday.

Whittlesey made sure the captain and fellow passengers knew who he was, asking whether any wireless messages had been received about the outcome of the Army-Navy game. During dinner at the captain’s table and in the lounge afterward, he spoke freely about the war, something he had avoided for three years. No one saw him leave his cabin or go overboard that night.

At Whittlesey’s home church, First Church of Christ in Pittsfield, the next morning, the congregation dedicated a bronze plaque memorializing the church’s war dead. The pastor [Rev. Hugh Gordon Ross] used as his text a quotation from Acts: “With a great sum obtained I this freedom.”

That day, the *Toloa* encountered rough seas. Many passengers stayed in their cabins and Whittlesey’s absence at meals prompted no inquiry until Monday, the 28th, when it was found that his cabin had not been used. In the note left for the captain, Whittlesey specified telegrams be sent to his parents, to Pruyn, to his

brother Elisha, and to Robert F. Little of White & Case – the latter with the instruction: “Look in upper left hand drawer of my desk for memorandum of law matters I’ve been attending to. I shall not return.”

The New York papers carried lengthy stories for days, with many quotes from friends and relatives. Little was quoted:

He was a victim engulfed in a sea of woe. His last work as chairman of the Red Cross Roll Call this month was all based on the suffering of the wounded. He would go to two or three funerals every week, visit the wounded in hospitals, and try to comfort the relatives of the dead.

Marguerite Babcock, Pruyn’s sister-in-law, said: “The last week his cheerfulness was in great contrast to his usual solemnity. That is what we cannot understand, unless he had made up his mind to take his life, and felt better that he had decided it.”

The four friends who had received letters refused to make them public, but said in a statement: “In the light of our intimate relations with him we are convinced that the theory voiced by the press as to the cause of his death is correct. His was a battle casualty.”

Most eloquent was the eulogy given on December 11 at the memorial service in Pittsfield by Judge Charles L. Hibbard, a friend of the family and Pittsfield’s orator of choice [and also a member of this Club]. After recounting Whittlesey’s career and time of trial in battle, he continued:

Then comes the truce of that November day, the return to the home land, the public recognition, the undying fame and the world’s acclaim. But how hard it is for this self-effacing young man to endure this public praise and recognition. . . . Wherever he turns, he is Col. Whittlesey, not the Charley Whittlesey of old days. Invitations to be honored and to honor pour in upon him. . . . There are funerals and hospital visits and the impact of all such experiences upon his sensitive nature is terrific.

Hibbard continued with a remembrance of a recent encounter with Whittlesey:

He is sitting on the piazza of a cottage by the sea on a glorious late September day but a few weeks ago. . . He is looking straight out to sea, with naught but sea between him and that land where lie so many of his boys. The beating surf is but an echo, the warm, bright sunshine, the blue sky, the dancing waves, all combine to charm. But a single look at his face and one knows he is unconscious of this glory of Nature. Somewhere far down in the depths of his being or in imagination far off across the waters he lives again the days that are past. That unconscious look has all the marks of deep sorrow, brooding tragedy, unbearable memories. Weeks pass. The mainspring of life is wound tighter and tighter and then comes the burial of the Unknown Soldier. This draws the last measure of reserve and with it the realization that life had little now to offer. This quiet, reserved personality drew away as it were from its habitation of flesh, thought out the future, measured the coming years and came to a mature decision. You say, 'He had so much to live for – family, friends, and all that makes life sweet.' No, my friends, life's span for him was measured those days in that distant forest. He had plumbed the depth of tragic suffering; he had heard the world's applause; he had seen and touched the great realities of life; and what remained was of little consequence. He craved rest, peace and sweet forgetfulness. He thought it out quietly, serenely, confidently, minutely. He came to a decision not lightly or unadvisedly, and in the end did what he thought was best, and in the comfort of that thought we too must rest. 'Wounded in action,' aye, sorely wounded in heart and soul and now most truly 'missing in action.'

Seventeen years later, Whittlesey's youngest brother, Melzar, said that he never opened the envelope delivered to him from the ship. "If my brother couldn't tell me why he did it, I don't want to know," he told an interviewer. "No, now that you have reminded me of it, I think I'll destroy it tonight."

But one letter, at least, survives, though it has never before been published or reported. Reposing in the archive of Williams College, it is the letter he wrote to John Bayard Pruyne:

Dear Bayard:

Just a note to say good by[e]. I'm a misfit by nature and by training, and there's an end of it.

I'm sorry to wish on you the job of executor, but there is very little to do . . .

I won't try to say anything personal Bayard, because you and I understand each other. Give my love to Edith.

As ever, Charles Whittlesey.

Retellings of the story have focused on the battlefield, treating the suicide as a footnote, and the sound bite of his friends, "His was a battle casualty," has been allowed to stand. His nearest relatives today hand down the family's feeling, that "he wanted to be with his men."

But these theories explanations don't fit with the farewell note to Pruyn, and don't answer the many questions Whittlesey left behind. Why, at age 37, apparently successful as a lawyer, did he live in a rooming house and die virtually penniless?\* Why did he never marry? Was he a homosexual? Was he affected by other family tragedies — the deaths of two siblings during his early childhood, the death of another brother, Russell, in 1911, and the serious illness of his brother Elisha? Did his own physical condition, evidenced by the reported chronic "racking cough," play a role?

Did he bury himself too deeply in volunteer efforts, speaking engagements and ceremonial appearances that would remind him of the deaths and injuries that had surrounded him on the battlefield? Did his refusal to discuss his war experiences suppress a serious depression related to traumatic stress suffered under fire? Was he bothered by the nagging possibility that different decisions made during the advance might have avoided the trap and the ensuing extraordinary level of casualties? Was he fatally disillusioned in his idealistic

hopes, and by the realization that for all its human cost, the Allied victory in the war had accomplished no lasting peace?

And what's behind his words to Bayard Pruyn, "I'm a misfit by nature and by training"? That he felt out of place in a society that valued masculine heroics and considered him odd for being uncomfortable with the hero's mantle and for visiting the sick and crippled survivors and the widows and mothers of the dead?

With today's hindsight, it seems likely that Whittlesey was a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). During and immediately after World War I, this condition was only vaguely understood and referred to as "shell-shock." Not until after the Vietnam War was PTSD, initially called post-Vietnam syndrome, officially classified as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association.

Ari Solomon, a professor of psychology at Williams, who recently reviewed the case, supports this view. Solomon would only speculate, since true psychological diagnosis of someone long dead is not possible, but he said, "There's nothing intrinsically mysterious about this suicide to a clinical psychologist. The circumstances that are known – sketchy as they are – seem consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder. Among PTSD's psychological features are: persistently re-experiencing a horrifying event emotionally (such as in nightmares or flashbacks); avoiding things that are associated with the event (or else tolerating them with great distress, as Whittlesey may have done); feeling detached from humanity or from one's 'normal' life; sleep disturbance; and feeling generally overanxious."

Whittlesey's story, Solomon said, appears to match the prototype fairly well. Also typical of PTSD, according to Solomon, is "survivor guilt – the feeling that 'the wrong person died,' or an irrational belief that you did something to cause the tragic event. It would be common for a man in Whittlesey's position to feel that he did not deserve to live while so many others had died."

The improved, "carefree" mood in his final days, noted by most who encountered

him, is not unusual in a suicidal person, often signaling that a final decision has been made, Solomon said.

If I could interview Whittlesey as a psychologist today, I'd especially have in mind ... the sharp discrepancy between the public role he was playing and his hidden agony, his constant re-exposure to reminders of the battle, his possible lack of intimate relations, and his felt need to hide his pain even from family and dearest friends.

When an organization of Lost Battalion survivors was formed in 1938, many of the veterans reported still having nightmares and "nervous reverberations." One, unable to attend in person, wrote, "We just do not have the control we should have. I went through without a visible wound, but have spent many months in hospitals and dollars for medical treatment as a result of those terrible experiences."

Such repercussions are common to trauma survivors, as are beliefs, according to Solomon, such as " 'nobody, not even my family, could accept me if I admitted what terror and shame I'm still experiencing.' " A psychotherapist today would seek to modify those beliefs, he said, because "getting to the point of feeling emotionally safe and emotionally supported is a critical aspect of recovering from PTSD."

The initial, very popular, assessment that the Lost Battalion's resistance would rank with Custer's Last Stand and the siege of the Alamo has not held up, although the episode has found its way as a case study into military textbooks. With only a few letters and contemporary recollections surviving, the mysteries will remain. Indeed, "his was a battle casualty." However, his own tantalizing hint, "I'm a misfit by nature and by training," also points to unresolvable conflicts between his public persona as a war hero, political speaker, leader and symbol, and the inner Whittlesey, an idealist, man of letters, and lover of nature and quietude.

As a final epilogue, there is the brief life of Whittlesey's only nephew, Frank Russell Whittlesey, the son of Melzar. He was born just five months before

Charles' death. Just two months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, at age 20, while enrolled at Yale, he enlisted in the Marine Corps. He was sent into action in the Pacific, taking part in the capture of Tulagi Island and Guadalcanal, where he was killed while assisting a wounded companion. His body was buried during the battle and not recovered until 1989, when a farmer turned up the remains. On Memorial Day, 1992, [in a service conducted by our fellow Club member, Richard L. Floyd] the Whittlesey family gathered, along with St. Paul's School and Yale classmates, to lay him to rest in the family plot in the Pittsfield Cemetery. Nearby, a few years later, veterans dedicated a stone in memory of the uncle he never knew, whose heroism had been an inspiration to him.

*\*Addendum, August 23, 2013 regarding the question of why Whittlesey "died virtually penniless": This is according to the probate report on Whittlesey's estate as published in the New York Times. Thanks to James, in the comments below, for the suggestion that perhaps Whittlesey gave away most of his assets in anticipation of his planned suicide.*

POSTED AT 5:48 PM