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Charles White Whittlesey, Scholar, Soldier, Humanist

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Charles Whittlesey – Wikimedia Commons

By Kathy Warnes

No one knows exactly what hour he slipped out of his cabin on the United Fruit Company steamship *Toloa*, bound for Havana, Cuba. He had said a cordial goodnight to Captain Grant

and his fellow passengers at about 11:15 on the night of November 26, 1921, and before he left the cabin that he had purposely chosen for its seclusion, he arranged nine letters in envelopes and a note for the captain on his bedspread. Then he went on deck, and by some accounts leaned over the rail, shot himself in the head with an army issue pistol and tumbled over the side, and by other accounts he simply climbed over the rail and fell into the cold embrace of the Atlantic Ocean.

No one in his time knew why this hero of World War I, who so many people besides his family and friends loved and respected, chose to end his life. A few close friends like John Bayard Pruyne and Judge Charles L. Hibbard suspected that he suffered from what then was called shell shock -today thought to be a form of post traumatic stress syndrome,- but he had skillfully managed to hide the depths of his despair from almost everyone but himself. True to his character, he had resolutely decided on his course of action, and carried it out as persistently as he had fought with his men to survive in "The Pocket" in the Meuse-Argonne campaign.

Childhood Memories

Charles Whittlesey started his life as a small town boy. He was born January 20, 1884, in Florence, a small town in northwestern Wisconsin, the second oldest of six boys. His brother Timothy is not often mentioned in biographies of Colonel Whittlesey, but the 1910 census lists Timothy as a son of Frank and Anna Whittlesey, born in 1894. An older brother Frank had died before his first birthday, but Charles and his four younger brothers, Russell, Elisha, Timothy, and Melzar grew to adulthood. A story in the Centennial edition of the [Florence Mining News](#) detailed his early life in Florence, Wisconsin, and described some of his boyhood exploits.

Annie Elizabeth, the only girl born to the Whittleseys, died of "black diphtheria" in 1894 just before her ninth birthday. *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 79, No. 16, October 13, 1922, sheds some light on what killed Annie. In an article called "Milk-Borne Diphtheria," Dr. Malcolm Graham, MD and E. H. Golzza, BS, described an advanced case of diphtheria where the mucous membranes of the throat had turned from the normal red to a dirty, black appearance. Many children besides Annie died in the diphtheria epidemic that swept through the ranks of Wisconsin children like a winnowing scythe in the mid 1880s. Annie's death affected her entire family deeply, but the loss of his only sister remained a sore spot in the soul of sensitive, bookish Charles for the rest of his life.

A New Englander by birth and inclination, their father Frank Whittlesey who hailed from Connecticut, traveled west with his two brothers to work in the lumber industries of Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Frank used his salesmanship to buy land and foster good relations with the Indians and his expertise in things electrical to bring electricity to the mining and lumber towns of northern Wisconsin and Michigan. The town of Menomonee, Michigan, also brought him his wife Anna Elizabeth Gibbs who he married on October 5, 1881.

A December 1, 1921 article in *Wisconsin's Appleton Post Crescent* sheds a little light on why the Whittlesey's named their youngest son Melzar and where Charles went to school during part of his childhood. The story datelined Green Bay, said that old time Green Bay residents remembered Colonel Whittlesey believed to have drowned in the ocean as a school boy who attended the Old First Ward School back in the early 1890s. According to the story, Charlie's father Frank Whittlesey was engaged in logging somewhere in the north while Charlie and his brother went to school in Green Bay. They lived with Mrs. Melzar F. Merick, their aunt. Melzar F. Merick at that time was the president of the Citizens National Bank of Green Bay.

Charles Whittlesey, Scholar and Lawyer

In 1894, the same year Annie died, the Whittlesey family moved to Pittsfield, Massachusetts. The newly created General Electric Company had acquired Frank's Company, Stanley Electric, and transferred him to Pittsfield, Massachusetts to work at the General Electric Company as a purchasing agent and later a production manager.

After graduating from Pittsfield High School, Charles enrolled at Williams College in Williamstown, about twenty miles away from Pittsfield. At Williams College, Charles shared a room with Max Eastman, who would later establish himself as a noted American writer, poet, and political activist. Charles embraced the socialist ideas of his friend and roommate and was a member of the American Socialist Party for a number of years before he resigned in disgust at what he considered the Party's increasing extremism.

At Williams, Charles developed his literary talents, joining St. Anthony Hall, a national college literary society. He served as Editor-in-Chief of the *Guilmensian*, the Williams College yearbook, and he was also the editor of the *Williams Literary Monthly* and the *Williams Record*. He wrote so frequently for the magazines that he edited that he was asked to write the essay on the "Literary Enterprises" of the Class of 1905 as well as for the Class book. His classmates nicknamed him "Count," for his aristocratic bearing and "Chick" because it was the popular

nickname of their time for Charles. Noting his literary skills and inclinations and intellectual interests, they voted him the third brightest man in the Class of 1905.

In 1905, Charles Whittlesey graduated from Williams College and he went on to earn a law degree from Harvard, graduating from [Harvard Law School](#) in 1908. He established a law practice in New York City with Murray, Prentice & Howland from 1908 to 1911 and in 1911 he went into law practice with his friend and Williams classmate John Bayard Pruyn at 2 Rector Street in New York City, residing at 136 East 44th Street.

Charles Whittlesey, Soldier

In August 1916, he graduated from the military training camp at Plattsburg, (the post office left off the h in Plattsburgh in those days) New York. On August 8, 1917, he was placed on active duty and asked to report to Camp Upton in Yaphank, Long Island, New York, where he received three months of training before he shipped out to Europe.

Charles Whittlesley had successfully completed a military training program for civilian called the [Plattsburg Movement](#). In 1913 during spring break Lieutenant Henry T. Bull, Cornell University's professor of military science, rode the train from Ithaca, New York to Washington D.C. to confer with General Leonard Wood, the Army's Chief of Staff. He urged General Wood to allow qualified students to be attached to regular army units for a month or more in the summer. The students would participate in the program strictly as volunteer civilians and would not be required to enlist in the Army.

President Woodrow Wilson's secretary of War Lindley M. Garrison supported the program and soon volunteers were training in several camps around the country. By 1914, war swept over Europe, making military preparedness take on a greater urgency in America, including New York. Hundreds of men in their thirties and forties volunteered for a summer camp at Plattsburg Barracks upstate New York, including Quentin Roosevelt and Theodore Roosevelt Jr. The Plattsburg camp which continued into 1915 provided a supplement to the camps for college men and was officially known as the Business Men's Camp because so many businessmen and attorneys like Charles Whittlesey trained there.

Charles Whittlesey, War Hero

In May 1917, [Charles Whittlesey](#) left his profitable law partnership with John Bayard Pruyn and joined the United States Army. He shipped out to France as a captain in the [77th Division](#), called the Metropolitan Division because mostly New York City men from the Lower East side filled its ranks. In Europe, he served with the 77th Division, 308th Battalion Headquarters Company and after participating in defensive actions behind the British front and in the Luneville Defensive Section, beginning in August 1918, his division moved into combat in the Vesle, Aisne, Argonne and Meuse offensives.

In October 1918, several companies of Major Charles Whittlesey's battalion were cut off for several days without food or ammunition. Although a formidable group military officials, historians, and others blamed Major Whittlesey's excessive zeal and inexperience for the battalion's predicament, an equally formidable group of supporters argue that the battalion's successful advance and the stalled advance on the Allied troops on the battalion's flanks had left them in their vulnerable position.

The 308th Infantry found itself cut off in The Pocket, a hill between Charleveaux Brook and the old Roman road and a railroad. German troops bombarded them with machine gun and trench mortar attacks and they even endured friendly fire from the 50th Aero Squadron who were confused about the coordinate of The Pocket. The chain of human runners from The Pocket to Headquarters had been disintegrated, forcing Major Whittlesey to use homing pigeons to communicate with Headquarters. He sent Cher Ami as the last communications pigeon on October 4, to stop the friendly fire.

Early on October 7, 1918, the same day that Allied troops arrived to rescue the "Lost Battalion" as the newspapers dubbed it, the German Commanding Officer who surrounded the 308th sent an American prisoner with a letter requesting that Major Whittlesey surrender his battalion for humanitarian reasons. Major Whittlesey and his second-in-command George McMurtry did not even acknowledge the request for surrender and Major Whittlesey pulled in the white panels he used to signal Allied planes in case the German mistook them for surrender flags.

The American Press reported that Major Whittlesey had replied "Go to Hell," in answer to the surrender request, but he later said that he had not answered the German letter because no reply was necessary.

On October 7, hours after the German request for surrender, several runners broke through the German lines to the south and lead advancing Allied troops to The Pocket. The 308th had been

rescued! When the Germans first surrounded the companies of the 308th Battalion on October 2, the 308th numbered 554 men. When the Battalion was rescued on October 7, 107 soldiers had been killed, 63 were missing and 190 wounded. Only 194 men were able to walk out of The Pocket.

After the rescue of his “Lost Battalion,” the Army promoted Charles Whittlesey from Major to Lieutenant Colonel, relieved him from further duty and honorably discharged him. He returned to the United States and on December 6, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Whittlesey received the Congressional Medal of Honor as did his second in command George McMurtry.

Colonel Charles Whittlesey, Veteran

After Armistice Day -November 11, 1918- thanks in part to the American Press the story of the Lost Battalion became one of the most reported and talked about World War I events. In 1919, Hollywood made the story of the Lost Battalion into a movie, starring many of the soldiers who had actually taken part in the mission, including Lieutenant Colonel Charles Whittlesey.

[Lieutenant Colonel Whittlesey](#) tried to return to his career as an attorney at Pruyn and Whittlesey and later at the Wall Street firm of White & Case, but he discovered that he could not recapture his quiet life. He had become a national hero and since the Lost Battalion was one of the most recounted World War I stories, many organizations asked him to speak about his war experiences.

Idealistic, modest, and sensitive, Lt. Colonel Whittlesey limited his war reminiscences to praising the enlisted men who had fought with him, calling them common soldiers who had not been recognized for their uncommon bravery and patriotism. When Colonel Whittlesey did speak about the War, he advocated pacifism, and endorsed the idea of a League of Nations as a promise of lasting peace. He continually stressed the valor of America listed men, encouraging people to 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.”

Instead of gradually receding with time, Lt. Colonel Whittlesey’s fame increased and he found himself in constant demand for speeches, parades, and honorary degrees. He visited wounded soldiers in New York City area hospitals and delivered eulogies at funerals of soldiers he had known. He marched with soldiers in a July 4 parade in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. He went to the

first New York State American Legion convention in Rochester and actively participated in the Roll Call, an annual membership drive supporting the New York City Red Cross. The pain of war seemed to overwhelm Colonel Whittlesey. He said 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 it much more."

In 1921, the Army promoted him to Colonel of the reserve division of the 108th, an honor he reluctantly accepted. The military asked Colonel Whittlesey to serve as a pall bearer at the ceremonies to honor the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery on November 11, 1921. It is possible that Colonel Whittlesey knew that another Whittlesey, [Brigadier General Eliphalet Whittlesey](#), rested in Arlington in Section ED SS Site 1110. Brigadier General Whittlesey who died on September 30, 1909, had taught at Bowdoin College and served as Secretary of the Board of Indian Commissioners for 25 years. He fought in the Civil War under General Oliver Otis Howard and after the War, he became a professor at Howard University. Like Charles Whittlesey, he too received honorary degrees and accolades.

Colonel Charles Whittlesey, Missing in Action

Friends and relatives noticed that Colonel Whittlesey seemed moody and depressed after the Unknown Soldier ceremonies at Arlington. He also had a racking cough probably an after effect from being gassed during the War that kept him awake at night and disturbed the other people at the rooming house where he lived. He mentioned to a fellow boarder that he might take a cruise to get away from things. After his speech at a Red Cross dinner he told his dinner partner that "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."

Colonel Whittlesey put his affairs in order and on November 24, 1921 without telling any of his family or friends of his traveling plans he boarded the *S.S. Toloa*. On the night of November 26, 1921, two days out of New York, he stayed up late reminiscing and telling war stories with Captain Grant and the crew. Then he excused himself and went to his cabin.

When Captain Grant of the *Toloa* notified Colonel Whittlesey's friends and relatives that he had been lost at sea, they couldn't believe the news because he hadn't told anyone about his travel plans. He had left letters addressed to his parents, his brothers Elisha and Melzar, his uncle Granville Whittlesey and his friends George McMurtry, J. Bayard Pruyn, Robert Forsyth Little and Herman Livingston, Jr. He didn't reveal the reason for his suicide in any of the letters and

no one publicized them. He also left a note to Captain Grant in his cabin directing the disposition of the baggage he left in his stateroom.

In his will found among the papers in his law office, Colonel Whittlesey left the famous German letter asking for surrender to George McMurtry and his Cross of the Legion of Honor to his closest friend John Bayard Pruyn.

On December 11, 1919, at the memorial service in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Judge Charles L. Hibbard, a friend of the family recounted Colonel Whittleseys career and trial by fire in battle. He concluded his remarks by saying,

“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.’”

Colonel Charles Whittlesey-Shell Shock, Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome?

Colonel Whittlesey’s family, friends, and contemporaries tried to come up with reasons for his suicide. Some of his friends and family believed that his sensitivity, modesty, ambivalent feelings about being treated as a hero, and the lasting effects of War’s destruction drove him to suicide. Others thought that perhaps he felt guilty about the possibility that he had given incorrect coordinates to The Pocket, causing friendly fire to rain on his men or thinking perhaps his refusal to surrender to the Germans may have led to increased casualties for the 308th Battalion.

Memories of lost friends must have weighed on Colonel Whittlesey’s mind. He must have agonized in private over his Harvard classmate, fellow Plattsburg Movement soldier and fellow lawyer Eddie Grant . After Eddie Grant graduated from Harvard Law School, he played several seasons of professional baseball for the Cincinnati Reds and New York Giants and then he retired and established a law practice. Eddie Grant enlisted in the Army when the United States entered World War I in 1917, serving as a Captain in the 77th Infantry Division. All of his superior officers were killed or wounded during the fierce battle of the Meuse-Argonne offensive and

Captain Grant commanded his troops on a four day search for the Lost Battalion that his friend Major Charles Whittlesey commanded. On October 5, 1918, an exploding shell killed Captain Grant. The first Major League Baseball player killed in action in World War I, he was buried at the [Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery](#) in Romagne, France.

His World War I experiences certainly weighed heavily on the mind and heart of Charles White Whittlesey as he returned home to make his peace with peacetime. When Captain Grant sent the wireless message that Colonel Whittlesey had disappeared from the *Toloa*, the news broke in newspapers all over the country, with a detailed story about him appearing in the [New York Times](#).

In Colonel Whittlesey's era, medical and military people and civilians to a lesser extent used the term "shell shock" to describe what modern medical science calls [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder](#)(PTSD). It is impossible to psychoanalyze a long dead soldier without straying into the realms of speculation and imagination, but twenty-first century understanding of PTSD compels thoughtful consideration of Colonel Whittlesey's reactions to the horrors of the First World War.

Soldier Against His Nature

[Charles White Whittlesey](#) hated war. He considered war morally unacceptable and recoiled at the thought of the country that he loved entering a World War. Relatives of his had fought in the Civil War, including the Brigadier General Whittlesey buried in Arlington National Cemetery. He believed that war held no glory, just destruction of land, resources, and people, but he obeyed the call of his country and fought bravely enough to become a legend. He sought neither medals for war nor accolades in peace, but he received both. He sought forgetfulness on the *Toloa*, but he is still remembered.

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