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The Tragedy of Heroism: Charles W. Whittlesey

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Charles Whittlesey was not one to acknowledge the accolades of others. He was a humble man but remained loyal to those with whom he served. His service in the First World War was the thing of legend and perseverance against insurmountable odds that still inspires today.



Whittlesey was born January 20, 1884 in Florence, Wisconsin to Frank and Annie Whittlesey – the eldest of four boys. The family moved to Pittsfield, Massachusetts sometime near the turn of the century when Frank received a position with General Electric.

Whittlesey graduated from Pittsfield High School and entered Williams College where he was a member of the Delta Psi fraternity. After graduating from Williams, Whittlesey attended Harvard Law School where he graduated in 1908. He then went to New York City to practice law with a private firm and then in 1911 he entered practice with his friend and classmate, J. Bayard Pruyun.

A month after the United States had entered the First World War in 1917, Whittlesey took a leave of absence from his law firm to join the Army. He shipped to France as a captain in the Army's 77th

Division, known as the “Metropolitan Division” since it was made up of mostly men from New York City – most of which were from the Lower East side and mostly the sons of immigrants. By September of 1917 Whittlesey was commissioned a major.

On October 2, 1918, Whittlesey and his command of 554 soldiers were ordered to move against a heavily fortified German position when the 77th Division was ordered into the Meuse-Argonne region as part of a massive American attack. Because the units on their flanks failed to make headway, Whittlesey’s troops were cut off from their supply lines, pinned down by German fire. The ensuing days were perilous for Whittlesey and his men as they were without food or water. Every movement was observed by German snipers and efforts to retrieve water from a nearby stream were halted because so many men were killed in the effort. For four days Whittlesey and his men resisted not only the German sniper attacks, but also German soldiers armed with grenades, trench mortars, and flame throwers. It was at this time that Whittlesey and his men became known as the “Lost Battalion.”

Because of their position, Whittlesey’s lines of communication were soon cut. Any contact with units in the rear would have to be made by homing pigeons. When an artillery unit received inaccurate coordinates, Whittlesey and his men found themselves victims of “friendly fire.” A hurriedly scratched message by Whittlesey found its way to the battery commander that read in part, “Our artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us. For heaven’s sake stop it.”

On October 6, an effort was made to resupply Whittlesey’s battalion. Because of incorrect coordinates very few supplies reached the trapped men. It was at this time that the Germans contacted Whittlesey requesting his surrender. A blindfolded American prisoner made his way into Whittlesey’s lines with the German message. Whittlesey and Captain George McMurtry, his second-in-command, refused to acknowledge the request and pulled in the white panels used to signal Allied aircraft for fear of being seen as flags of surrender.

When more air reconnaissance missions were conducted, the men were located and eventually rescued on October 7, 1918. Of the original 554 soldiers involved in the advance, 107 had been killed, 63 were missing, and 190 were wounded. Only 194 were able to walk out unhurt.

Soon after the rescue of the Lost Battalion, Major Whittlesey was promoted to lieutenant colonel. He was relieved from further duty on October 29th and returned to the United States a war hero. On December 5th he was honorably discharged and the next day received word that he was to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor (his subordinates Captain McMurtry and Captain Holderman also were awarded the Medal of Honor).

Following his discharge, Whittlesey returned to his law practice, but found himself in constant demand for speeches, parades, and honorary degrees. A modest and sensitive man, Whittlesey was uncomfortable with the attention he received and shared very little detail as possible about his time with his men in the Argonne. His public speaking was limited to praising the enlisted men with whom he served, the common soldier who received little to no recognition for their uncommon bravery. So dedicated was he to his men of the Lost Battalion that Whittlesey left his sick bed to attend the funeral of a private who served under him. His last work as the Chairman of the Red Cross Roll Call in New York City was all based on the suffering of the wounded. He attended nearly two to three funerals a week, visited the wounded in the hospitals, and comforted the families of the dead. In perhaps his final act of gratitude to the fallen of the Great War, on November 11, 1921, Whittlesey attended the internment of the Unknown Soldier from World War I, along with several fellow Medal of Honor recipients.

Later that month on November 24th, Whittlesey booked passage from New York to Havana aboard the USS Toloa, a steamship owned by the United Fruit Company. On November 26th, the first night out from New York, Whittlesey dined with the captain and then retired for the evening around 11:15pm; it was noted that he was in high spirits.

Whittlesey was never seen again.

He was reported missing the next morning. It is presumed that he committed suicide by jumping overboard, although no one had seen him jump and his body was never recovered. His friends and family had no idea of his travel plans and were shocked when they received the news of his disappearance and that letters had been prepared to those close to him. None of the letters hinted to the reasons for his suicide and the recipients never made the letters public. His will, which was drawn up prior to his voyage, left his property to his mother. To his friend George McMurtry, Whittlesey left the original copy of the German surrender request.

Several theories existed at the time as to what had pushed Whittlesey to such depths of depression: deaths of soldiers that remained a constant reminder of the war, feelings of guilt over not surrendering to the Germans and prolonging the suffering of his men, or his inability to adjust to the life of a hero. Whatever the exact reason may have been, it is clear that his death was indirectly related to the unhappiness which occurred after his experiences in the War.

by Kevin Welker

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New York Times: *Col. Whittlesey, of the 'Lost Battalion' Vanishes From Ship*, November 29, 1921

New York Times: *Sought Whittlesey half day in midsea; Search Will Make Fruit Liner Toloa Late Reaching Havana*, November 30, 1921