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Charles White Whittlesey

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Jump to: [navigation](#), [search](#)

for others with the same name, see [Charles Whittlesey \(disambiguation\)](#)

Charles White Whittlesey	
	
	
Charles White Whittlesey	
Nickname(s)	"Galloping Charlie"
Born	January 20, 1884 Florence, Wisconsin
Died	November 26, 1921 (aged 37) (Presumed)
Allegiance	United States
Service/branch	United States Army

Years of service	1917–1919
Rank	 Lieutenant Colonel
Unit	1st Battalion, 308th Infantry , 77th Division
Battles/wars	World War I * Meuse-Argonne Offensive
Awards	Medal of Honor
Other work	Attorney

Lt. Colonel **Charles White Whittlesey** (January 20, 1884 – Presumed date of death November 26, 1921) was an [American Medal of Honor](#) recipient who is notable for leading the "[Lost Battalion](#)" in the [Argonne Forest](#) during [World War I](#).

Contents

[\[hide\]](#)

- [1 Biography](#)
 - [1.1 Early life and education](#)
 - [1.2 Military service](#)
 - [1.3 Post war](#)
 - [1.4 Disappearance](#)
- [2 Medal of Honor citation](#)
- [3 See also](#)
- [4 Notes](#)
- [5 References](#)
- [6 Further reading](#)
- [7 External links](#)

Biography[\[edit\]](#)

Early life and education[\[edit\]](#)



Whittlesey as he appeared while a student at Williams College

Whittlesey was born in [Florence, Wisconsin](#), but moved with his family in 1894 to [Pittsfield, Massachusetts](#), where he graduated from [Pittsfield High School](#) class of 1901. He enrolled at [Williams College](#), where he was a member of [St. Anthony Hall](#),^[1] graduating in 1905. He was voted the "third brightest man" in his class, and because of his aristocratic manner was nicknamed "Count." He earned a law degree from [Harvard Law School](#) in 1908. Soon after graduating he formed a law partnership with his Williams classmate J. Bayard Pruyn in [New York City](#). Influenced by his friend and roommate at Williams, [Max Eastman](#), Whittlesey spent several years as a member of the [American Socialist Party](#) before resigning his membership in disgust over what he viewed as the movement's increasing extremism.

Military service[\[edit\]](#)

A month after the United States entered [World War I](#) in 1917, Whittlesey took a leave from his partnership and joined 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](#). Its members spoke 42 different languages or dialects.

By September 1917 Whittlesey was commissioned a major. On the morning of October 2, 1918, the 77th was ordered to move forward against a heavily fortified German line as part of a massive American attack in the [Meuse-Argonne](#) region. Whittlesey commanded a mixed battalion of 554 soldiers, who advanced forward through a ravine. 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 from the surrounding 200-foot (61 m) high bluffs. The following days were perilous for Whittlesey and his men, as they were without food or water. Some of the men had never thrown a live grenade, but for four days, they resisted snipers and attacks by waves of German troops armed with hand grenades, and in one incident, flame throwers. During this period war correspondents seized on the incident and dubbed the unit the "Lost Battalion."


On October 7, the Germans sent forward a blindfolded American POW carrying a [white flag](#), with a message in English:

“ 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 [the bearer] as an honorable man. He is quite a soldier. We envy you. The German commanding officer. ”

Whittlesey's alleged reply was "You go to hell!", although he later denied saying it, saying a response wasn't necessary. He ordered white sheets that had been placed as signals for Allied aircraft to drop supplies to be pulled in so they would not be mistaken for surrender signals. That night, a relief force arrived and the Germans retreated. Of the original 554 troops involved in the advance, 107 had been killed, 63 were missing and 190 were wounded. Only 194 were able to walk out of the ravine.

Post war[[edit](#)]



 Monument to the Lost Battalion in the Argonne Forest, France.

Whittlesey received a battlefield promotion to lieutenant-colonel and returned to the [United States](#) as a war hero, receiving on December 6, 1918, one of the first three Medals of Honor awarded for valor in the war. (One of the other two went to his [second-in-command](#), [George G. McMurtry](#).)

The story of the Lost Battalion was one of the most talked about events of World War I.^[2] In 1919, the events were made into a movie with many of the actual soldiers who were part of the Lost Battalion playing themselves, including Whittlesey.

He tried to return to his career, working as an [attorney](#) at the [Wall Street](#) firm of [White & Case](#), but found himself in constant demand for speeches, parades, and honorary degrees. The pressure

wore on him; he complained 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."^[1]

Disappearance[[edit](#)]

In November 1921, Whittlesey acted as a [pallbearer](#) at the burial of the [Unknown Soldier](#) at [Arlington National Cemetery](#), along with fellow Medal of Honor recipients [Samuel Woodfill](#) and [Alvin York](#). A few days later he booked passage from New York to [Havana](#) aboard the [SS Toloa](#), a [United Fruit Company](#) ship. On November 26, 1921, the first night out of New York, he dined with the captain and left the smoking room at 11:15 p.m. stating he was retiring for the evening,^[3] and it was noted by the captain that he was in good spirits. Whittlesey was never seen again. He was reported missing at 8:00 a.m. the following morning. He is presumed to have committed [suicide](#) by jumping overboard, although no one reported seeing him jump and Whittlesey's body was never recovered. Before leaving New York, he prepared a [will](#) leaving his property to his mother. He also left a series of letters in his cabin addressed to relatives and friends. The letters were addressed to his parents, his brothers Elisha and Melzar, his uncle Granville Whittlesey, and to his friends George McMurtry, J. Bayard Pruyn, Robert Forsyth Little and Herman Livingston, Jr.^[1] Also in his cabin was found a note to the captain of the *Toloa* leaving instructions for the disposition of the baggage left in his stateroom.^[1] He left the famous German letter asking for surrender to McMurtry.

Whittlesey's headstone is in a cemetery in [Pittsfield, Massachusetts](#). The headstone notes that his body was never recovered.^[4]

In 1948, the Charles White Whittlesey Room was dedicated at the Williams Club in New York City.^[5]

In 2001, U.S. television channel [A&E](#) made a television movie called [The Lost Battalion](#) based on accounts of the battle. In that portrayal Major Whittlesey was played by [Ricky Schroder](#).^[6]

Medal of Honor citation[[edit](#)]

Rank and organization: Major, U.S. Army, 308th Infantry, 77th Division. Place and date: Northeast of Binarville, in the forest of Argonne France, 2 – October 7, 1918. Entered service at: Pittsfield, Mass. Birth. Florence, Wis. G.O. No.: 118, W.D., 1918.

Citation:

Although cut off for 5 days from the remainder of his division, Maj. Whittlesey maintained his position, which he had reached under orders received for an advance, and held his command, consisting originally of 46 officers and men of the 308th Infantry and of Company K of the 307th Infantry, together in the face of superior numbers of the enemy during the 5 days. Maj. Whittlesey and his command were thus cut off, and no rations or other supplies reached him, in spite of determined efforts which were made by his division. On the 4th day Maj. Whittlesey received from the enemy a written proposition to surrender, which he treated with contempt,

although he was at the time out of rations and had suffered a loss of about 50 percent in killed and wounded of his command and was surrounded by the enemy.

See also[[edit](#)]



- [List of Medal of Honor recipients for World War I](#)

Notes[[edit](#)]

1. ^ [Jump up to: ^a ^b ^c ^d](#) "[Charles Whittlesey: Commander of the Lost Battalion](#)". The Great War Society. 2000. Retrieved 2006-09-07.
2. [Jump up](#) ^ "[Wings of Valor: The Lost Battalion in the Argonne Forest](#)". C. Douglass Turner. Retrieved 2008-02-20.
3. [Jump up](#) ^ Parrish, Melvin M. (August 26, 1980). "[Florence Native Commanded Famed Lost Battalion in World War I](#)". *Florence Mining News*. p. 26. Retrieved September 7, 2007.
4. [Jump up](#) ^ <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=6022334>
5. [Jump up](#) ^ "[Walter Frankl, Portrait of Colonel Charles White Whittlesey](#)". The Williams Club of New York. 1998. Retrieved 2007-09-07.
6. [Jump up](#) ^ See credits for *[The Lost Battalion](#)* at the [Internet Movie Database](#).

References[[edit](#)]

- "[Charles White Whittlesey](#)". *Claim to Fame: Medal of Honor recipients*. [Find a Grave](#). Retrieved December 7, 2007.
- "[Sought Whittlesey half day in midsea; Search Will Make Fruit Liner Toloa Late Reaching Havana](#)" (pdf). *The New York Times*. November 30, 1921. p. 5.

Further reading[[edit](#)]

- [Slotkin, Richard](#) (2005). *Lost Battalions; The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationality*. New York: H. Holt. [ISBN 0-8050-4124-9](#). [OCLC 58975902](#).

External links[[edit](#)]

- "[Charles White Whittlesey, Medal of Honor recipient](#)". *World War I*. [United States Army Center of Military History](#). June 8, 2009. Retrieved December 7, 2007.
- "[Whittlesey biography](#)". Retrieved September 27, 2010.
- "[Picture](#)". Retrieved September 27, 2010.^[*dead link*]