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Florence County, Wisconsin

Congressional Medal of Honor Recipient

Charles W. Whittlesey

1883-1921



The President of the United States
in the name of The Congress
takes pleasure in presenting the

Medal of Honor

to

WHITTLESEY, CHARLES W.

Rank and Organization: Major, U.S. Army, 308th Infantry, 77th Division. *Place and Date:* Northeast of Binarville, in the forest of Argonne France, 2-7 October 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.

--Congressional Medal of Honor Society, Charles W. Whittlesey

Charles W. Whittlesey Newspaper Articles

MEDAL PRESENTED TO COL. WHITTLESEY

Exercise on Boston Common As "Lost Battalion" Commander is Honored

Boston, Dec. 24--Major General Clarence R. Edwards, commander of the Northeastern department, today bestowed upon Lieut. Col. Charles W. Whittlesey of the 308th Infantry a congressional medal of honor awarded him for gallantry in defying the Germans, when with a small band of soldiers, he was for five days cut off from communication with his division. The exercises were held on Boston Common where a battalion of coast artillery forces from the harbor forts was drawn up on the parade grounds.

General Edwards was accompanied by his full staff, Rear Admiral Spencer S. Wood and other army and navy officials. In presenting the medal General Edwards said:

"I am directed by the war department to bestow upon you this medal for extreme

bravery in battle.

"I was in France at the time your act thrilled the entire American expeditionary force and it gives me great pleasure to present this medal."

--*Watertown Daily Times, Watertown, NY., December 24, 1918*

SEATTLE MAN CLAIMS WHITTLESEY AS KIN

Hero of "Lost Battalion" in Argonne Forest, His Nephew, Says S.A. Gibbs

Lieut Col. Charles W. Whittlesey, commander of the world-famous lost battalion and hero of the Argonne Woods, is a nephew of S.A. Gibbs, leather dealer, who lives at 911 Lakeview Ave., in this city, and is first cousin to Elmer Gibbs of the Ford Motor Car Company.

"The first reports of the then Major Whittlesey gave his initials as Charles M.," said Mr. Gibbs yesterday. "I was hoping that a mistake had been made and that the hero was my nephew. Sure enough, the next day's press dispatches gave his correct name as Charles W. Whittlesey.

"He's my sister's boy. She is the proudest mother in all the United States today. It is nineteen years since I last saw Charlie. He was then about ready to study law. He graduated from Yale and then started the practice of law in the City of New York. When the war broke out he enlisted and received his first training at Plattsburg, coming out as a second lieutenant.

"Next he was stationed at Camp Upton and sailed for France as a captain. A few weeks after his arrival on the other side he was commissioned as major. Shortly after he told the Germans to go to H--! in the Argonne forest, he was decorated and commissioned a lieutenant colonel.

Remembers Him as Boy

"I remember him best as a little shaver when he and my boy Elmer played together. He and Elmer are about the same age. As I remember Charlie was always a game little fellow and none of the tots could put anything over on him. At that time Charlie was living at Florence, Wis. We were across the Michigan line. Later the Whittleseys moved to Pittsfield, Mass., and we came to Tacoma."

"Lieutenant Colonel Whittlesey's battalion, according to Mr. Gibbs, was ordered to hold certain trenches. They succeeded in pushing back the Germans, but because reinforcements failed to come, the entire battalion was surrounded by Huns. With but one day's rations, the gallant few withstood the attacks of the enemy for five days. On the fifth day the commander of the German forces in that district sent a message to Major Whittlesey, under a white flag. He told the Yanks of their helpless situation and suggested that they surrender. Major Whittlesey then gave his historic answer.

"Charlie was one of the first three men to receive a Congressional medal for the exploit." said Mr. Gibbs. "One of the other three men was a captain in command of

one of the 'lost battalion' companies.

"Charlie is back in the United States now. I hope he and his mother will pay us a visit this summer.

--Seattle Daily Times, December 15, 1918

3 HEROES WILL ATTEND BURIAL OF "UNKNOWN"

Gen. Pershing Picks Sergts. Woodfill, York and Major Charles Whittlesey

WASHINGTON, Oct. 31.—Examination of war records by Gen. Pershing has resulted in the designation of Sergeant Samuel Woodfill, as the American infantryman who, through heroism in the World war is most entitled to represent the Infantry branch of the array at the Armistice day ceremonies for America's unknown dead soldier.

The final report soon to be submitted by General Pershing in part is:

"Deeds of valor were too numerous to mention here. Outstanding was the heroism of Lieut. Samuel Woodfill, Fifth division, in attacking single-handed a series of German machine gun nests near Cunel and killing the crews of each in turn, until reduced to the necessity of assaulting the detachment with a pick, dispatching them all; and of Sergeant Alvin C. York, of the 82nd division in standing off and capturing 132 Germans after his patrol was literally surrounded and outnumbered 10 to 1; and of Major Charles S. Whittlesey and his men of the 77th division when their battalion was cut off in the Argonne, in refusing to surrender and holding out until finally relieved."

--Sandusky Register, Sandusky, OH., November 21, 1921

COMMANDER "LOST BATTALION" TAKES OWN LIFE ON SHIP

Lt. Col Charles Whittlesey, Sorrowing for Death Soldiers, Loses Control of Mind at Memorial

New York, Nov. 29--Secret brooding over the horrors of his experience in the war, from which he emerged one of America's greatest individual heroes, was ascribed today by friends and relatives of Lieutenant Colonel Chas. M. Whittlesey, as the cause of his taking his life Sunday on the way to Havana.

Leaving several letters, presumably explaining his act, the commander of "The Lost Battalion" disappeared from the steamship Toloa, 24 hours out of New York. His intimate friends has no idea he was making an ocean voyage.

Members of his family and business associates were incredulous at first when a wireless dispatch reported him missing. But as evidence accumulated, they reluctantly came to the conclusion that the missing man was Colonel Whittlesey. And then they recalled incidents, which pieced together in the light of his tragic death, might have been recognized as indications that his spirit was shaken by recurrent memories of his brothers-in-arms who had died before his eyes in France.

The last blow, they say, more trying than the rest, was in Washington a fortnight ago when he took part in the funeral services for America's unknown soldier. He returned

to the capitol more depressed than before, the haunting visions clearer than ever, bearing him down. There he had met hundreds of former friends and had marked anew the gaps in the ranks of the men he loved.

"His mind stopped," was the explanation of Robert Forsythe Little, of the law firm of White and Case, with which Colonel Whittlesey had been associated for about a year. "It had all it could bear remarkable mind though it was. I don't think there is a man in the country who had had the trying experiences Colonel Whittlesey has had in the past two years.

Always Accessible

"He was the hero who was always accessible to those who thought he would help them. The disabled, the jobless, the friendless, the widows of the war--all of them--were on his mind constantly. For the last two years there has scarcely been an hour when the grief and horror of the war was not brought vividly and specifically before him."

Colonel Whittlesey had told no one, apparently, that he was going to Havana. When he left his office Friday afternoon, it was with some cheery remark regarding the Army-Navy football game, which he intended to see.

At his boarding house on East 44th Street, he told friends he was going away "to be by myself--to rest," when he left Saturday morning with a traveling bag. he was in the habit of taking weekend trips and his going was unmarked by any unusual circumstances.

Colonel Whittlesey's uncle, C.W. Whittlesey, of New York, agreed with his nephew's legal associates that he had come back from Arlington with the recollections induced by the memorial services weighing heavily on his mind.

Colonel Whittlesey's name leaped into world-wide prominence over-night through his retort to the German officer who called on him to surrender after he was surrounded in the Argonne.

For four days and nights, his command, the First Battalion, 308th Infantry, 77th Division, had lain under fire, cut off from aid, without food or water. All but 87 men had been killed or wounded.

Blindfolded, and under the protection of a white flag, a German soldier stumbled into the American strong point.

"Surrender," he cried, "in the name of humanity," and he told how from the German trenches, the agonized cries of the American wounded could be heard.

"You go to hell," Colonel Whittlesey replied.

A few hours later American reserves attacked all along the line, the Germans were pushed back and the little band of survivors saved.

On his return to the United States he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the most coveted American decoration for heroism, and a few months after the armistice, the German officer who called on him to surrender, made a public statement

extolling the courage and dogged determination of his former foe.

--Hattiesburg American, Hattiesburg, MI., November 29, 1921

Siege of "Lost Battalion" Was War's Supreme Hero Story--So Say the Authors of a Recently-Published Book in Which Is Given for the First Time the Complete and Authentic Chronicle of This "Unique, Poignant Episode Whose Luster Has Been Dimmed by a Tarnish of Mystery and Sensational Rumor."--Western Newspaper Union.

--By Elmsco Scott Watson

On the afternoon of October 8, 1918, a party of 194 American soldiers, ragged, haggard, some of them trembling with weakness but keeping in formation, led by a major and a captain, tramped wearily across Charlevaux valley in the Argonne Forest in France. They were marching to the rear, to brigade reserve and rest.

"From beyond La Palette, the raw wind brought a faint rapping sound, and above their heads came the whipping and snapping of machine-gun bullets, almost spent—the enemy's last groping finger-tips. Those who were left of the Lost Battalion did not even turn their heads; they looked neither to the right nor left. One, who saw them pass, remembers today their eyes. 'When I looked into those eyes, there was nothing I could say to them.' "

Such is the graphic description of the climax of one of the most dramatic incidents in American history, as given in the book 'The Lost Battalion,' written by Thomas M. Johnson and Fletcher Pratt and published recently by the Bobbs-Merrill company. "The siege of the Lost Battalion endures after 20. years as the supreme American hero-story of the World war," says the foreword to this book. "Yet , this unique, poignant episode has had no complete chronicle, and its luster has been dimmed by a tarnish of mystery and sensational rumor. To get and tell the full truth, we have joined forces: a sometime war correspondent who reported the episode at the time, albeit under censorship, and an historian who has specialized in military history."

In order to make their book a complete and authoritative account of this epic event, the authors did a thorough and painstaking job of research. They consulted all the army records and dispatches bearing upon the incident. Although the 100-odd survivors of the Lost Battalion are scattered all over the country they interviewed in person or by letter as many of these as possible. They examined diaries and letters written at the time and checked the Reichsarchi in Potsdam to get the German side of the story.

Dispelling the Myths

Out of all their research; has emerged a story "far different from, and in many ways much more creditable to those participating than, the legend which has grown so profusely about it."

The epic of the 'Lost Battalion' had its origins in an order issued by Maj.-Gen. Robert Alexander of the Seventy-seventh-division at the beginning of its drive- against the Germans in the Argonne late in September. That order read: "Ground once captured must, under no circumstances be given up in absence of direct, positive and formal, orders-to do so emanating from these headquarters. Troops occupying ,ground must be supported against counterattack, and, all gains held. It is a favorite trick of the Boche

to spread confusion among our troops by calling out 'Retire!' or 'Fall back!' If, in any action, any such command is heard, officers and men may be certain that it is given by an enemy: Whoever gives such a command is a traitor, and it is the duty of any officer or man loyal to his country, who hears such an order, to shoot the offender upon the spot. WE ARE NOT GOING BACK, BUT FORWARD!"

Remembering that order, Charles W. Whittlesey, major in command of the First battalion of the Three Hundred Eighth infantry of the Seventy-seventh division, had no thought of retreat when, on the morning of October 3, he found his command caught in a "pocket," a ravine a mile or so northeast of Binarville.

Twice during the division's drive, which began on October 2, he had protested against making the attack that would put his command in the dreaded "pocket," but he was overruled by his superior officers. His orders were to drive on "without regard to flanks or losses." So he felt that he had no choice but to obey.

He Obeyed Orders

Despite the encircling movement of the Germans, Whittlesey knew on the morning of October 3 that he could get his men safely back to the main army, but he decided to hold his position. Later regular army officers, trying to gloss over the episode, blamed Whittlesey for too much zeal and for not withdrawing.

The result, was the five-day siege in which Whittlesey's force, steadily reduced in numbers until only 194 of the 554 men who went into the "pocket" came out. of it, beat off the assaults of the Germans—by infantry attack, by trench mortar bombs, hand grenades, and machine gun fire, by sniping rifle fire from the front, flank and rear and finally by flame-throwers.' The Americans dug fox-holes among the trees along the slope of the valley and hung on desperately—short of rations, without enough water and with no surgeons to care for their wounds.

According to the testimony of most of the survivors, a 3 1/4 hour period of the second day of the siege was the worst of all. At noon on October 4 there was a lull in the German firing. Whittlesey's men crawled out of their fox-holes and sat around, wishing for something to eat. Suddenly there was a violent explosion; then two more and then three in quick succession. They were shellbursts, shells coming from the south where the American artillery divisions lay. Their preliminary warning screeches were distinctly the Franco-American 75s, not the German 77s. The line of fire methodically moved forward and then concentrated squarely on the place where the battalion lay.

The "Friendly Barrage."

Whittlesey scribbled a message: "We are along the road parallel 276.4. Our own artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us. For heaven's sake, stop it." Omer Richards, the French Canadian pigeon man, nervously, clipped the message to the leg of the last pigeon, Cher Ami, and tossed the bird in the air, starting it on the hazardous journey back to Corporal George Gault who was in charge of the Seventy-seventh division's pigeon loft.

Cher Ami, its breast-bone shattered and a leg and an eye missing, arrived at the headquarters loft shortly before four o'clock. By that time the bombardment had ceased, but the damage already had been done. Whittlesey found that 80 of his men had

been killed or wounded in the "friendly barrage."

Later in the afternoon, the Germans captured several of the command, including two lieutenants,

Leak and Harrington. Left alone for a few minutes, the prisoners fabricated a tale that probably saved the Lost Battalion from complete extinction. Each man, cross-examined in turn, gave the same answers to the enemy questioners: that the beleaguered American battalion consisted of 1,500 men well equipped with ammunition and food. Those inspired lies, the authors say, kept the Germans from making a concerted attack on the pitifully weak garrison.

During the next two days, the men of the isolated group were agonized by the sight of Allied airplanes flying over the ravine and dropping packets of food, cartridges and first aid supplies into the German lines. Besides not having the proper co-ordinates, the pilots were misled by the American panel signals which were set out by the wily Germans. The drinking water situation also was desperate.

The morning of October 7 Whittlesey noticed that the morale of his men was breaking down. The runners he had sent back for relief apparently had been captured or killed.

"There was a shortage of writing materials particularly of paper. A few men wrote final messages to loved ones on scraps of bandage or pieces of shirttail whacked off with pocket knives, with blood for ink, not in a gesture of melodrama, but out of necessity."

A Demand for Surrender

Later in the afternoon the crumbling morale was revived when the German letter asking immediate surrender was received, Lowell R. Hollingshead, 18-year-old private who had been captured by the Germans, bore the letter back to Major Whittlesey.

The popular legend has Major Whittlesey shouting "Go to hell!" to the enemy. Major Whittlesey's story is that there were no Germans near for him to shout that to, so he just folded up the letter, put it in his pocket and said to Hollingshead, "Go back to your post." In his written report the major said simply, "No reply seemed necessary."

One effect of the letter was to infuriate the Americans so that for two days more they valiantly held out until finally on the night of October 7 several volunteer runners got through to the 154th brigade and the First battalion of the 307th infantry, led by Major McKinney smashed through the German lines and reached the "pocket." The Lost Battalion was saved!

In regard to the "go-to-hell" legend, the authors of "The Lost Battalion" say: "Major Whittlesey never said 'Go to hell!' if only because there was no German present to whom to say it. But, German and all, the myth has been perpetuated by a colorful artist's painting, and even by a fake photograph allegedly snapped by one of the

Lost Battalion

"The myth probably originated in the headquarters of the Seventy-seventh division. Thence someone sent an official report giving the text of Lieutenant Prinz's surrender

letter and the concluding line: 'The reply to the above was "go to hell!" back to Lieut. E. Kidder Meade at First Corps headquarters.

"A day or two later, on a visit to the Seventy-seventh division headquarters, the co-author of this volume, Thomas M. Johnson, asked General Alexander,

""What did Whittlesey tell 'em?'

" 'What WOULD he tell 'em?' General Alexander retorted. 'He told 'em to go to hell.'

"Shortly afterward, Mr. Johnson asked Major Whittlesey the same question. The major-replied:

" 'We told them nothing.'"

"He and Captain McMurtry wrote into their official report that: 'No reply seemed necessary.'

"But typewriter, cable and linotype—to say nothing of headline writer—had done their work; millions of Americans were throwing down their newspapers to give three rousing cheers for 'Go-to-hell Whittlesey' and the 'Lost Battalion' that had not lost its nerve. Whoever invented that story was a genius at wartime propaganda. He could have put into the mouth of the New England lawyer no words that would more endear him and his men to average Americans—or more inflame their war spirit."

In this hero worship, according to Johnson and Pratt, lay the main reasons which caused Whittlesey later to commit suicide.

They write:

"His whole position, on being demobilized, was a painful one. He was naturally a rather modest and retiring individual; naturally he had always, been acutely uncomfortable in the presence of anything that savored of personal publicity or personal display. He had an acute sympathy with the forgotten man and wanted to be one himself. Now that the fighting was over he wanted nothing so much as to revert to his previous status, to sink into the crowd and bury himself in his legal work.

"But he was not permitted to revert. He had been named by Pershing himself as one of the three outstanding heroes of the A.E.F. and he was the only one resident in New York and instantly available for all kinds of speeches and ceremonies. His office became-a rendezvous for job-hunting ex-soldiers—'Not a day but I hear from some of them' he said once. He was not a private citizen, but an exhibition piece, a plush horse.

"A plush horse-constantly on exhibition in circles where a word about his real convictions on war as a bloody and unnecessary business (which do not appear to have changed) would have caused a violent scandal and made people think him insane. Still more would a word of his real convictions as to the episode for which he was being honored; he thought it fortuitous and futile." Not merely the desire to avoid publicity such a word would entail, but also his sense of social duty—in this case, duty to his old comrades of the A.E.F., many of whom had given lives to an ideal he regarded with suspicion—forbade him to speak; forbade him publicly to question any detail of the official version. Yet every day saw him forced deeper into his false position, every event

force upon him more undesired honors, more elements of a career not of his own choosing,"

The result was that about two weeks after the dedication of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington—a ceremony which he, with some 30 others who had received the Congressional Medal of Honor could not avoid attending—he boarded a steamer for a vacation in Cuba. That night he went out on-deck and jumped over the rail.

--Johnson County Democrat and Oxford Reader, Oxford, IA., October 13, 1938

A CERTAIN VALOR



'POCKET' FULL OF HORROR

The 136 passengers aboard the United Fruit Co. cruise ship Toloa, bound for Havana, were aware of Charles W. Whittlesey. There had been a stir at dockside in New York when reporters learned that he was sailing.

For though World War I had ended three years before, the scholarly, taciturn lawyer was still a national idol--lionized for his heroism as commander of the 1st Battalion, 308th Regiment, 77th (Statue of Liberty) Division--the famed "Lost Battalion"

The passengers later remembered Whittlesey had appeared depressed during the first two days of the voyage. Though he had attended the dancing and the parties, he had kept to the sidelines. No one remembered him speaking a word. He had seemed only to

be left alone.

Unaccountably, he had sought solitude in the midst of a boisterous, reveling throng on a two-week cruise of the Caribbean. The 6,500-ton Toloa had departed New York at midnight, Thursday, November 24, 1921--Thanksgiving Day. The ship would dock in Havana without her famous passenger.

The official record states that Charles Whittlesey, major, Infantry, was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for "conspicuous intrepidity in the face of the enemy, above and beyond the call of duty..." The citation detailed Whittlesey's conduct while commanding the 1st Battalion, 308th Regiment from 2 October to 7 October, 1918, in the Argonne Forest.

The popular term "Lost Battalion," was a misnomer. At no time was the unit's position unknown--especially to the Germans.

Whittlesey's unit was part of the assault force of the "Big Drive" aimed at breaking through the Hindenburg Line.

The immediate problem in the Argonne was to drive the Germans from commanding positions along ridges to the front and on both flanks. It was a murderous assignment. German artillery on the heights searched every foot of the terrain below. Machine-gun nests concealed in the valley thickets raked every angle of the American advance.

The 1st Battalion, 308 Regiment, was pinned down in a tangled sink that became forever after "the Pocket." Unable either to move forward or to withdraw, Whittlesey's command of 550 men withstood and repulsed repeated enemy attacks.

Efforts by other units to break through to the relief of the battalion were shattered by artillery or cut to pieces by machine-gun fire. Whittlesey and his men endured five terrible days of incessant shelling and laceration by small arms. Without food, without water, without medicine or drugs for the wounded, still they refused every appeal to surrender.

At one point the German commander sent Major Whittlesey a note under flag of truce:

"...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..."

Again Whittlesey refused to give up. When a short time later rescue came, the 1st Battalion had virtually ceased to exist. Of the 550 men who had been trapped in the Pocket on October 2, 107 were dead, 196 wounded, and 63 missing.

After the war, General John Pershing called then-Lieutenant Colonel Whittlesey one of three "outstanding" American heroes of the conflict. Whittlesey walked in tall company. The two others singled out by the commanding general were Maj. Gen. Douglas MacArthur and Sgt. Alvin C. York.

Few men less resembled the popular conception of war hero than Charles W. Whittlesey of Pittsfield, Mass. Tall, spare and bespectacled, he looked more teacher

than soldier.

A successful member of a distinguished New York law firm before the war he had been graduated with honors in 1905 from the Williams College School of Law.

Like many young intellectuals of his time he was attracted to socialism and voted for Eugene V. Debs in the presidential election of 1912. He was also a devout pacifist. The thought of war, of men killing other men, was revolting to him.

But when the World War erupted in 1914 he was revolted also by reports of German atrocities, the devastation of Belgium, and later by the unrestricted U-boat attacks against Allied Shipping. He became convinced that German militarism was an evil that had to be expunged, whatever the cost to his beliefs and to his conscience.

Whittlesey enlisted in the Army in 1916, and by virtue of his R.O.T.C. training at Williams College was commissioned a major.

With the Armistice, no one wanted more to forget the war than Whittlesey. But a worshipful public wouldn't permit it. He was bombarded with requests to speak. He found it impossible to refuse appeals from charitable groups and veterans' organizations, especially survivors of the 77th Division. He was hounded into a misery of memories.

The searing climax apparently came at the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, November 11, 1921. Whittlesey said to a friend, "I keep wondering whether the Unknown Soldier is one of my men killed in the Pocket. I should not have come here. It has been too unnerving."

To another he confided in a letter, "I hear the wounded screaming again. I have nightmares about them; I can't remember when I last had a good night's sleep. I wish they would let me forget what happened. They're always after me about the war.

"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. I was to be left in peace..."

On Saturday night, the 26th of November 21, while revelers aboard the S.S. Toloa danced, drank and made love--Charles W. Whittlesey went unnoticed to the ship's rail and buried his torment forever in the gently rolling Caribbean. In his cabin were found separate letters to his family and close associates. No one would reveal the contents.

His oldest brother would say only, "You must consider him to be a war casualty. I will divulge nothing further, either at this time or in the future..."

--*The Seattle Times, March 11, 1973*