

Erwin Bleckley & Harold Goettler

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The Lost Battalion of World War I

Perhaps one of the best glimpses of the impact the sight of ground warfare had upon the minds of an aviator, can be found in an account of 27th Aero Squadron Commander Major Harold Hartney's visit to the front lines with soon-to-be Ace of Aces, Frank Luke.

In the days after the August 1, 1918 air battle that cost Hartney six planes out of an 18-plane patrol, he assumed his dubious task of visiting the front lines to search for survivors or salvageable aircraft from the battle. In his subsequent book *Up and at 'Em*, he described some of the events of that trip:

The first time I really took much of an interest in him (Lieutenant Frank Luke) was about three days after I had lost six of my officers and Don Hudson had shot down two Rumplers carrying four men on Aug. 1, 1918. I had already been up to the lines to see if I could find any of my boys. That first day I could not get any farther than Villers Cotterets, not far from our small advance airdrome, although farther north, and had to return by foot and freight train via Paris.

A couple of days later Luke came to my tent and said, "Major, Lt. Clapp (Luke's flight commander) says it's all right for me to go up with you this morning if you can take me."

I shall never forget that journey. Frank, one enlisted man, and I went along in my Packard. On this trip, he walked freely of his days on the plains back home, of incidents of his training, of his ambition to be an outstanding flier. He was always extremely serious.

Walking to the top of a hill we found the two German planes Hudson had brought down. The two pilots and their observers were still there, their faces black, the summer sun getting in its rapid work. One of them had on ver light patent leather low shoes. This impressed Luke. "Wonder where he was the night before," he murmured. Rumor had it among the ground troops that one of these Germans was a girl, but this was not true.

Three hundred yards farther we came to the top of another knoll and looked down the other side, a smooth space of about a hundred acres. Never have my eyes rested on such a sight. May they never again behold one like it. The hill was literally covered

with dead men, side by side, head to head, little or no space between, practically all of the American doughboys. They had died in droves charging German machine-gun nests left behind to cover the retreat. Right in front of us were a German and an American who had actually pierced each other with their bayonets and neither bayonet had been withdrawn.

Frank stooped over and picked up some unmailed postal cards fallen from the pocket of a dead soldier. The one on top was addressed to his mother out in Iowa. "Leave them there," I said. "That American padre over there is busy picking up such things to send back to the next of kin." Carefully and reverently, Luke replaced the cards in the pocket of the dead Yankee. "Boy!" he exclaimed. "I'm glad I'm not in the infantry. They haven't a chance, have they Major."

No one can say for certain what impact Frank Luke's visit to the front lines had on his subsequent rise to become America's Ace of Aces. Luke certainly would have become the great Balloon Buster had he NOT seen that battlefield early on, driven to attack them by the sheer fact that they were the greatest challenge to any airman. But perhaps to some degree, upon seeing the devastation wreaked upon soldiers of the ground, and in the knowledge that observation balloons contributed materially to such carnage, it gave him an added determination. We do know that, during his brief stint as the Balloon Buster, he became a friend and hero to the infantrymen on the ground.

Of a truth, ground combat was no more dangerous than aerial combat. One of the best ways for a young man to become a combat casualty was to become an airman. But when the dogfight was over and the tracers had ended, the victorious pilot could fly back to his aerodrome to eat in a mess hall and sleep intent, while the infantryman struggled to sleep through a miserable night in a rain-soaked trench or "funk hole".

The sheer brutality of combat in World War I is perhaps most evident in the casualties sustained. A comparison to other modern wars is relevant. During World War II some 16 million Americans served, suffering more than 1 million casualties, 408,306 of which were battle deaths over four years. During the three-year Korean War, nearly 55,000 Americans were killed in action, and during the 14 years of American combat action in Vietnam, more than 58,000 Americans were killed in action.

While the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) arrived in Europe in June 1917, there was little combat action for the doughboys until the German offensive in the spring of 1918. From the closing days of May until the Armistice on November 11th, U.S. forces suffered more than 100,000 battle deaths, and more than 200,000 wounded in action. That translates into more than 300,000 casualties among a force of 1.2 million soldiers, in a period of only six months.



After decisive victories at Cantigny, Chateau-

Thierry, and the Belleau Wood to halt the Spring Offensive and push the German forces backward, the 1st US Army under General John J. Blackjack Pershing launched the St. Mihiel offensive on September 12. Within 24 hours the German salient on the right bank of the Meuse River fell, eliminating a long-standing threat to the Allied line. More than a half-million American soldiers and airmen participated in the encounter. At the cost of 7,000 casualties, they captured 16,000 Germans, 443 artillery pieces, and created a new threat to the enemy stronghold at Metz.

The results of these four major actions as well as British, Australian, and French ground fighting primarily in the north of France, had pushed the Germans all the way back to their first line of defense. In the north, this virtually impregnable system of trenches, bunkers, and barbed wire barricades was known as the Hindenburg Line. Built-in 1916-17 under Paul von Hindenburg and his quartermaster-general Erich von Ludendorff, the well-fortified line stretched from Arras in the north to St. Quentin, and eastward into Belgium. This line of defense was further extended by the dense Argonne Forest that lay between the Aisne and Meuse Rivers.

The Meuse-Argonne Campaign

Though labeled a “forest”, the Argonne could probably be more appropriately called a “jungle”. Stretching from the Belgian frontier to Verdun, it comprises a region of northern France about 44 miles long and with an average width of 10 miles. Elevations average over 1,000 feet, but this average is difficult to compute because the area is ruggedly laid out in a series of deep valleys and sheer cliffs that rise to become high mountains. The entire region is heavily forested over a blanket of dense brush.

Throughout three years of warfare, German forces had supplemented the natural barrier of the Argonne with elaborate concrete and steel bunkers, some so advanced as to contain electricity and modern furnishings. Machine gun emplacements had been built up with concrete and timber to withstand the most formidable of assaults, then carefully camouflaged to enable them to catch any advancing foe by surprise. The valleys and ravines were strewn with barbed wire, logs, and other man-made obstacles.

When the Spring Offensive failed, the German forces were able to retreat to an area into which only a foolish enemy would dare to advance.

On September 22, following the highly successful St. Mihiel Offensive, General Pershing reluctantly moved his 1st Army into the Argonne sector. Four days later the American line, consisting of the Ist, IIIId, and Vth Corps, stretched nearly 20 miles from Regneville-Sur-Meuse to La Harazee in the Argonne Forest above the Biesme River. Nine divisions formed the front line with three held in reserve. West of the Aisne River and on to the East of the doughboys were French troops, now under U.S. Command, poised to attack the German fortress. Opposing them was the German Fifth Army with eight divisions, part of the German Third Army, and enemy commanders had at least eight divisions in reserve.

With British and Australian forces attacking the Hindenburg line in the north while French forces assaulted the middle, the AEF was divided between the two sectors. Pershing wasn't happy to have more than one million doughboys involved on two lines separated by some 60 miles but followed orders to poise the forces under his command to enter the Argonne Forest. Allied military planners hoped that this Autumn offensive would continue to push the Germans, still reeling from their earlier losses, out of their sanctuary before winter set in. If that could be accomplished, the Allies would mount their own Spring Offensive the following year and hopefully bring the war to an end. Even the most optimistic tacticians would never have dreamed that in six weeks the campaign would be so successful as to result in Armistice on November 11.

Phase One

The great Allied offensive that ultimately ended the war within six weeks began on the morning of September 26 and was actually conducted in three phases. The first phase (September 26 – October 1) drove a salient about 7 miles deep into enemy positions in front of the Hindenburg line. The one blemish on the first four days of advance was along the Argonne region, where the 1st Army struggled not only against the German forces but against the rugged terrain and inhospitable weather.



On the left flank of the 1st Army's front along the Argonne was the

77th Infantry Division, better known as New York's Own. Organized at Camp Upton, Yaphank, New York on August 25, 1917, most of its 23,000 men were citizens-turned-

soldier as a result of the Selective Service Act of the same year. Ultimately, the Draft would call to service 2.5 million men between the ages of 18 and 30 during World War I. As such, the men who were holding the left flank of the American assault on the Argonne Forest were former Manhattan taxi drivers, Bronx tailors, Brooklyn factory workers, Wall Street executives, and first-generation immigrants.

The bright blue patch bearing the image of New York Harbor's most famous lady, the Statue of Liberty, earned the division another nickname that would endure through World War II. The 77th Infantry became known as the Liberty Division and was the first Army division to arrive in France in the quest to shine the light of the torch of liberty in war-torn Europe.



While the Liberty Division held the left flank of the First

Army's assault, its component 308th Infantry Regiment held the left flank of the Division. First Battalion, 308th Infantry, 77th Infantry Division was commanded by 33-year-old Major Charles Whittlesey, a most unlikely citizen-soldier.

Born in Florence, Wisconsin, the be-speckled Whittlesey graduated from high school in Pittsfield, Massachusetts where his classmates voted him "the third brightest man in the Class of 1905". After high school young Charles attended Harvard Law School, graduating in 1908. Whittlesey was practicing law in New York when he was called to active duty in August 1917 and ordered to report to Camp Upton. After three months of training and an OCS (Officers' Candidate School) commission, he was sent to Europe where he first served with Headquarters Company of the 308th. When a three-hour artillery barrage signaled the start of the Meuse-Argonne offensive at 2:30 a.m. on September 26, Major Whittlesey prepared to lead his battalion of citizen-soldiers into the German lair. In the process the 1st Battalion, 308th Infantry Regiment, 77th Infantry Division would lose its official identity to become forever, and erroneously labeled:

The Lost Battalion of World War I THE FIRST POCKET

At 5:45 a.m. the 308th Infantry began the ground assault in their area of the Argonne

region near the town of Binarville. To their right was the rest of the 77th Division and the bulk of Pershing's 1st Army. On the left flank were the 38th French Corps and the 368th Infantry of the 92nd (Rainbow) Division. During the first day's advance, the 1st and 2nd Battalions crossed a large number of enemy trench systems. For the most part, resistance was light except for Company A which encountered an enemy force about a mile southwest of Binarville, resulting in 8 Americans killed, 23 wounded. As night fell, the men of the 308th dug in and tried to keep warm against the oncoming chill of winter. To facilitate the advance into the Argonne, the infantrymen had been ordered to travel light, leaving behind their winter garments and wool coats.

Of that first night of the offensive Major Whittlesey later wrote, "we found mineral water in bottles in the German dugouts, so it might have been worse." The 308th had advanced a quarter-mile during the day, achieving the Corps objective, a marshy area north of the German third line of trenches. Unknown to them during their advance, as they had moved dangerously into enemy territory, their own left flank had been unprotected. The 368th Infantry had been withdrawn, and further flanking cover would fall to the French.

The advance resumed at 1 p.m. on September 27 with Whittlesey's First Battalion leading the way. Company A again ran into a deadly hail of fire that decimated their ranks, resulting in twelve men killed, eighteen wounded, and four missing. In the first two days of fighting, the 205-man company was reduced to 144 doughboys led by a single surviving officer. Casualties mounted among the other companies as well, and the 2nd Battalion under Major Ken Budd was rushed to the front of the American lines.

At regimental headquarters during that day, Colonel Prescott was relieved and command of the 808th Infantry Regiment was transferred to Lieutenant Colonel Fred E. Smith, a likable leader who had entered the service from Bartlett, North Dakota. Smith had previously ingratiated himself to the men of the regiment by smuggling in a quantity of grape marmalade, which he sold to the men at a cost to provide some dessert for their otherwise bland diet of field rations.

By nightfall, despite increased enemy resistance, the 308th had advanced nearly a quarter of a mile further into enemy territory, with orders to continue at 5:30 a.m. the following morning.

Despite the orders to continue the advance, September 29th dawned with some good news. The first field rations in two days arrived, even as some units were moving out. As the half-starved men turned to welcome the needed breakfast, German observers noted the activity and opened fire in what the veterans of the regiment later called the "Cruller Barrage". The commander of Company B recorded in his official report: "Bacon, butter, bread, and a one-pound cannon barrage from the Germans, which wounds

Corporal Spahr." Despite the irony of being shelled upon receiving their first ration detail in two days, the day would only get worse.

Moving into the ever more dense forest, the advanced companies found themselves frequently separated and confused. Enemy trench mortars halted the advance of the assault for hours, and Company A suffered two more soldiers killed, eleven wounded, and one man missing. Company D had been reduced to but two fighting platoons and enemy resistance throughout the region had wreaked such a toll on the 308th in the first three days that beyond the three battalion commanders and Major Whittlesey's adjutant, no battalion officers remained. Non-coms were forced to lead entire companies of infantrymen, now devoid of company-grade officers, and every unit was suffering from being under strength to the task at hand.

By nightfall, the 1st and 2nd Battalions realized that their exposed left flank had been filled by the Germans, and communications had been cut off to Headquarters. Major Budd of the 2nd Battalion watched as elements of B and E company came under fire in an exposed ravine from an enemy machine gun, and ordered their withdrawal while covering the retreat with his pistol. Most of his doughboys settled in near a railway in the valley to dig funk holes to try and survive the night.

Companies A, C, F, and H had advanced under Major Whittlesey to an area only a half-mile southeast of Binerville before digging in for the night. Despite the chill, the men welcomed the rain that came that night. Many of them have gone without a proper ration of drinking water for nearly four days. By daybreak the rain had become a curse, filling the funk holes and turning the trenches into a field of mud.

From the night of September 28 until October 1, most of the First and Second Battalions were well ahead of the rest of the advance, dug in to find shelter from the now heavy enemy fire, and suffering from a lack of rations and ammunition. To make matters worse, their runner lines were cut off by the German infiltration, requiring them to communicate with headquarters by carrier pigeon. Though the subsequent isolation of October 3-7 would mark them the Lost Battalion and their tenuous position labeled The Pocket, survivors later spoke of The First Pocket (the position from September 29 – October 1) and The Second Pocket, the later incident. History has often confused the two separate incidents.

Runner Lines and Carrier Pigeons

As in any war, communication was essential to the advances of any unit during World War I. Before the advent of radio communication, transmissions of tactical information between headquarters units were left to telegraphed messages or even more rudimentary means. Military units on the advance, as was the case with the leading battalions of the 308th Infantry, could not reasonably establish telegraph lines back

to headquarters, so messages were normally passed through runner lines.

As the infantry commander moved his front lines forward, runner posts were established at intervals to relay messages from the commanders at the front to the headquarters in the rear, much as a track team passes the baton in a relay race. It was an effective means of two-way communications unless, as happened during the night of September 28, the enemy was able to surround the advance element and break the runner line.

Even more rudimentary was the back-up method of communication, sending messages by carrier pigeon. An advancing unit during World War I often carried some of these small birds, trained to fly back to their coop upon release. When a message couldn't be sent by the runner line, the field commander would write his message, fold it neatly into a small canister attached to the leg of one of his pigeons, and release the bird to fly home.

Back at the pigeon's coop, an intricate system of wires was rigged to sound a buzzer any time a bird returned home. The coop-keeper would remove the message from the canister, then pass it on by messenger or telegraph, to the appropriate headquarters.

On the morning of September 29, Major Budd and Major Whittlesey sent four such carrier pigeons with messages to headquarters. One of them summed up the situation:

"Our line of communication with the rear still cut at 12:30 p.m. by machine guns. We are going to clean out one of these guns now. From a wounded German officer prisoner, we learned that there is a German Company of 70 men operating in our rear, to close up the gap we made yesterday. We can of course clean up this country to the rear, by working our companies over the ground we charged. But we understand our mission is to advance, and to maintain our strength here. It is very slow trying to clean up this rear area from here by small details when this trickling back of machine guns can be used by the enemy. Can a line of communication not be kept open from the rear? We have been unable to send back detail for rations and ammunition, both of which we need very badly."

Back at headquarters Lieutenant, Colonel Smith read the message from Whittlesey and Budd with mixed emotions: concern for their tenuous situation – surrounded by enemy forces, and admiration at their determination to comply with orders to continue the advance and trust the reserve elements to mop up their now enemy-infested rear. Quickly he assembled a small detachment of ten men, two officers, and some runners to carry messages. With them, the element carried ammunition to resupply the beleaguered forward battalions, and the regimental commander himself led them to the anticipated rescue.

The soldier acting as a guide for Smith's squad-sized relief force believed he was leading the element directly into the forward element's position, when in fact he became confused and wandered deep into the enemy-infested left flank. The first sign of trouble came when a German machine gun opened up from a distance of only 50 yards.

Shouting for his men to take cover, Lieutenant Colonel Smith ordered his men to fall back and take cover, while boldly drawing his pistol to fire on the enemy gun crew. Hot lead opened a hole in the regimental commander's side and he staggered for a moment, severely wounded, then regained his footing. Despite the pain, he continued to fire at the enemy position until most of his party had reached safety.

Realizing the hidden enemy gun posed a dangerous threat to his command, Lieutenant Colonel Smith refused first aid for his wounds. Working his way to a hand grenade dump he armed himself, then returned in full view of the enemy to single-handedly attack the menacing position. Before he could locate it, enemy fire again tore into his body. For his courageous leadership that day, Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Smith was subsequently awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor, the first of five for the men of the 308th Infantry Regiment, and the second to be earned by a member of the Liberty Division. (Farther north in the attack on the Hindenburg Line, nine other American soldiers earned Medals of Honor on this day. To the south of where Lieutenant Colonel Smith's body lay, the eleventh Medal of Honor was earned in support of the offensive into the Argonne Forest when Lieutenant Frank Luke destroyed three enemy balloons before vanishing into history.)

Back in The First Pocket, Majors Budd and Whittlesey struggled to maintain the morale of their now starving battalions in the face of almost certain doom. One of their company commanders refused to let the situation ruin his own sense of humor. Captain George McMurtry enticed his men with suggestions of: "How would you like to have a good thick rare steak smothered in onions and some French-fried potatoes?"



One month shy of his 41st birthday at the advent of the Meuse-

Argonne offensive, Captain George McMurtry could well be described as an "old warhorse". Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, he was a Harvard graduate. At the age of

22, he enlisted in the Army at New York to serve in Troop D of Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt's famous Rough Riders, with whom he made the legendary charge on San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War. As a young enlisted man, McMurtry became a career soldier who worked his way up through the ranks, then obtained a commission when the Army established its first Officer Candidate Schools in May of 1917. Described as a big, burly, Irish-American with a ruddy face who seemed to always be of good cheer, McMurtry was one of the most experienced officers of the 308th Infantry Regiment who easily acquiesced to the orders of those above him despite his greater degree of military experience.

Captain McMurtry's sense of humor and overt optimism was sorely needed during the three days of survival in The First Pocket. Relief finally arrived on the afternoon of September 30. Captain Delehanty and Lieutenant Conn guided Company K down a narrow path to bring supplies to the beleaguered forward elements of Major Whittlesey and Major Budd. It was the same day that Major Budd departed for the General Staff College at Langres, and Captain McMurtry was assigned to command 2nd Battalion, 308th Infantry. Major Whittlesey later wrote:

*"Lt. Taylor came up with a lot of rations and a big carrying detail. (It) looked 'practically O.K.,' as George McMurtry put it. And everybody ate! That night I went back to Regl. Advance Hdqrs.-which had been moved forward in the woods. It was the blackest night I've ever seen and I had to be passed on from reserve post to post holding the hand of each successive guide. And I'll never forget going into the Hdqrs. dugout and getting warm for the first time, and seeing Frank Weld's genial face. Cocoa, cigars. Then back to the Bn. again, which I found with great difficulty in the darkness.
"Orders were to advance at daybreak."*

Advance, they did, directly into enemy fire and more tragedy. Lieutenant Scott led his Company A in one assault, becoming one of nine men killed this day. By nightfall, no living officer remained to command the company, and of the 205 men who had comprised Company A when the assault began on September 26, only 106 remained.

Phase Two

The first phase of the offensive against the German lines in the Western Front closed on a highly successful note. In heavy fighting, the British, Australians, French, and American soldiers in Northern France had breached the foreboding Hindenburg line and stood poised to break it completely. The only dismal reports reaching Allied headquarters seemed to be those coming from the Argonne region. Phase Two (October 4 – 16), was set to begin. General Robert Alexander, commander of the 77th Infantry Division had decided it would begin with his doughboys already turning the tide in

the enemy-infested forest. He ordered a three-prong assault directly into the middle of the Argonne, with the 308th Infantry Regiment pushing through a gap in the German lines on the left flank of the American front. "My orders were quite positive and precise," he wrote in his official record of the Argonne-Meuse operations for the 77th Division. "The objective was to be gained without regard to losses and without regard to the exposed condition of the flanks. I considered it most important that this advance should be made and accepted the responsibility and the risk involved in the execution of the orders given."



At 10 a.m. on October 2 Major Whittlesey received

his orders. Together with McMurtry's 2nd Battalion, he was to proceed through the gap in the German defensive line towards the ravine along the Charlevaux Creek and take up a position below the east-west La Viergette-Moulin de Charlevaux road and the railroad track that paralleled it. Orders were precise, the objective was to be taken that day, regardless of casualties, and regardless of whether or not the anticipated protection on the left flank by the French forces materialized. Remembering the earlier tragedy when flank support broke down and his doughboys were trapped for three days in The First Pocket, Major Whittlesey protested:

"Well, I don't know if you'll hear from us again."

October 2, 1918

As specified in his attack orders, Major Whittlesey placed two companies (D and E) under Lieutenant Paul Knight on the west end of the ravine as a containing force for the left flank. At 12:30 p.m. he then committed the rest of his force to the fulfillment of his battle orders.

The element that would later be called "The Lost Battalion" was not really a battalion at all, but a composite of three separate battalions and two machinegun companies. George McMurtry's 2nd Battalion entered the valley below Charlevaux Mill under the command of Major Whittlesey, giving him six companies of infantrymen from the 308th (Companies A, B, C, E, G, and H) for the attack, with Companies D and E in their position of containment. Supplementing the initial advance were nine machine

guns from Companies C and D of the 306th Machine Gun Battalion. Despite the manpower of three different battalions in his composite force, Whittlesey's command was well below strength for a normal infantry battalion, and he entered the ravine with fewer than 700 men.

Slowly the American force wended its way along either side of the ravine behind a heavy artillery barrage and an advance line of scouts. Along the route, Whittlesey placed 2-man runner posts every two hundred yards, to relay messages to and from regimental headquarters. Resistance was relatively light, and one patrol from Company D captured an entire company of German Hessians without a fight, the prisoners being marched back to the American rear guard. But when resistance was encountered, the results could be devastating. The already battered A Company assaulted one small hill and lost 90 men in less than 30 minutes of fighting. Only eighteen men of the once 205-man company remained to enter The Second Pocket with Major Whittlesey.

After crossing Charlevaux Creek via a small foot-bridge, Major Whittlesey began placing his survivors beneath the road that was their objective. The battalion had reached its goal for the day by 6 p.m. and needed to dig in for the night. Whittlesey wisely selected a deep gash 300 yards long and 60 yards deep in the steep slope beneath the road. It was this gash, surrounded by heavy forest and dense brush, that would become known as The Second Pocket. Little did anyone realize that it would also be their home for the next five days. For all too many men under the command of Major Whittlesey and Captain McMurtry, it would also become their cemetery!

The scholarly lawyer from New York certainly selected his position well, placing his command post in a funk hole in the center of the position and sharing it with Captain McMurtry. His machine guns were set up on either flank and when the men had dug their own funk holes in the hard shale, they settled in for an evening meal of field rations. Quickly word spread that two of the companies had been marshaled forward so quickly they had been unable to draw their rations. Generously, and on their own initiative, the men of the other companies volunteered to share with those who had none, despite the order that had sent them into their present position with only one day's rations.

October 3, 1918 (Day 1)

Morning dawned after an uneventful but chilly night in the Argonne, the men huddled for warmth in the absence of tents, blankets, or even heavy coats. Beneath the first rays of light, Major Whittlesey set in motion his runner posts, passing back to headquarters more than a kilometer away, news that he had reached his objective and advising of his condition and position.

Regimental headquarters already was aware of much that had happened the previous day, knew that 1st and 2nd Battalion had entered the ravine below Charlevaux Mill after breaching the gap in the German line. Colonel Cromwell Stacey, who had replaced Lieutenant Colonel Smith after his death, also understood what Major Whittlesey didn't yet know. The two battalions from the 308th Infantry had been the only American units along the entire 1st Army offensive line to break through the German defenses, leaving them alone behind enemy lines. On the evening of October 2, support units had been dispatched throughout the sector to support this advanced American element. All had met heavy enemy fire, and ultimately only one small element succeeded in breaking through. That unit was the 97 men of Company K, 307th Infantry under a young Lieutenant named for a legendary American military hero.



Named for Civil War hero and Medal of Honor recipient Nelson

Appleton Miles, Nelson Miles Holderman was himself destined to distinction. Entering military service as a member of the California National Guard, the Nebraska native had served in 1916 during the Mexican Border Service. When the United States entered World War I, he had risen through the ranks to the position of lieutenant in Company L, 7th California Infantry Regiment. He and his entire company were subsequently assigned as replacements to Company K, 307th Infantry Regiment, 77th Infantry Division. From the moment of his arrival at The Second Pocket early on the morning of October 3 until October 7th, he and his 97 soldiers would be the last Americans to safely enter or leave the ravine along Charlevaux Creek. During the night of October 2-3, the enemy had discovered the breach in their lines, filled the gap, and then surrounded 554 Americans.

An hour before Lieutenant Holderman arrived in the pocket, Whittlesey had dispatched Company E under Lieutenant Karl Wilhelm to attack enemy positions west of the ravine and guide Companies D and F forward from their blocking positions. As yet the commander was unaware that his forces were surrounded and trapped, or that his runner lines had been broken. At 8:30 a.m. German artillery began to fall but with little damage, as the pocket was well protected by a reverse slope. During the bombardment, two small patrols were sent to recon the right and left flanks. Twenty minutes after the barrage began, the as-yet-undisturbed major dispatched the first of his carrier

pigeons to the rear with a simple message:

"We are being shelled by German artillery. Can we not have artillery support?"

Shortly after the first pigeon was released, the bad news began arriving. Both reconnaissance patrols returned to advise Whittlesey that they had seen enemy patrols on both flanks, and had been unable to contact any friendly units. At 10 a.m. the survivors of Company E returned from their early morning mission to link up with the blocking force to the west. After departing the pocket and scaling the western slope of the ravine the company had been engaged by a large enemy force. Only some 18 men under Lieutenant Leake had managed to get safely back to the pocket to advise the commander that the enemy had fortified the area to the rear of the advance line. Minutes later one of the men from the nearest runner post arrived to report that enemy fire had wiped out at least two posts, and the runner line was broken. At 10:45 Major Whittlesey sent his second pigeon back to headquarters with a solemn message:

"Our runner posts are broken. One runner captured. Germans in small numbers are working to our left rear about 294.6-276.2. Have sent K Company, 307th, to occupy this hill and open the line.

"Patrols to east ran into Germans at 295.1-176.3 (6 Boches). Have located German mortar at 294.05-276.30 and have sent platoon to get it.

"Have taken prisoner who says his company of 70 men were brought in here last night to 294.4-276.2 from rear by motor trucks. He says only a few infantrymen here when he came in. German machine gun constantly firing on valley in our rear from hill 294.1-276.0.

"E Company (sent to meet D and F) met heavy resistance, at least 20 casualties. Two squads under Lieutenant Leake have just fallen back here."

Whittlesey and his men weren't lost in the traditional definition of the term, they knew exactly where they were, as did their command headquarters. Unfortunately for all of them, the Germans also knew exactly where they were. Even the wire service editor who later coined the term "Lost Battalion" acknowledged he had never meant to imply that the battalion was confused about its location, but rather that the battalion was "done for... in a hopeless situation." This latter definition was all too close to the truth of the matter.

*The Lost Battalion
Roll Call – October 3, 1918*

308th Infantry	1st Bn HQ and Runners	
	Company A	13
	Company B	18
	Company C	54
	2d Bn HQ, Scout Platoon, and Runners	8552
	Co E	21
	Co G	56
	Co H	101
Medical Detachment	3	
306th MG Bn	Company C	13
	Company D	40
307th Infantry	Company K	98
Total Strength – 554 Men		

At last fully aware of their desperate position, Major Whittlesey and Captain McMurtry held council in the funk hole they shared, then personally passed their orders to their company commanders: "Our mission is to hold this position at all costs. No falling back! Have this understood by every man in your command."

As the afternoon wore on, sniper fire began raining on the pocket from all directions. In the distant woods, the surrounded Americans could actually hear the enemy officers calling roll as they mustered their troops. And then they came, swarming the pocket from all directions. At 4:05 p.m. Whittlesey dispatched his third pigeon and last message of the day:

"Germans are on cliff north of us in small numbers and have tried to envelope both flanks. Situation on left very serious.

"Broke two of our runner posts today near 294.7-275.7. We have not been able to reestablish posts today.

Need 8000 rounds rifle ammunition, 7500 chau-chat, 23 boxes M.G. and 250 offensive grenades.

"Casualties yesterday in companies here (A, B, C, E, G, H) 8 killed, 80 wounded. In same companies today, 1 killed, 60 wounded.

"Present effective strength of companies here, 245.

"Situation serious."

Whittlesey's report of 245 effective soldiers reflected all that remained of the more than 400 men of the 308th that had entered the pocket the previous day. With slightly more than 150 men of the machine-gun companies and Lieutenant Holderman's company, his force had fallen below 400 effective fighting men and reflected a 25% casualty rate in the first 24 hours alone.

To make matters worse, the men had eaten the last of their rations during the afternoon, and the vicious attack late in the day had taken a toll on the supply of ammunition. Fortunately, his men had repulsed the enemy on all sides, despite heavy casualties. Over the days to follow the enemy would keep the Lost Battalion under his guns, but did not again mount as heavy an infantry assault on the position. Perhaps the German commander understood that, for the American soldiers trapped in the pocket above Charlevaux Creek, time was the German army's best ally.

October 4, 1918 (Day 2)

The weary men of the Lost Battalion welcomed the first rays of sunshine after their second frigid night in The Pocket. There had been little enemy action during the preceding hours of darkness, but to say the night had been a quiet one would have been to deny the cries of anguish from the many wounded. These put forth a heroic effort to maintain silence. Captain McMurtry had passed one private who had been shot through the stomach and paused to ask how he was doing.

Gritting his teeth against excruciating agony, the young doughboy replied, "It pains like hell, Captain, but I'll keep as quiet as I can."

Undercover of darkness, Major Whittlesey had dispatched several scouts with orders to try and break through the enemy cordon and reach the regimental headquarters. As daylight dawned a few of these scouts returned to the pocket, wounded. Those who did not return were not heard from again and were counted among the missing.

False hopes were raised early on when a dawn scout patrol crawled through the marsh south of the pocket, only to be turned back by heavy enemy fire from the high ground. Though deterred from their mission, these reported that enemy activity seemed to be diminishing. Major Whittlesey appraised regimental command as such with his first pigeon of the morning, released at 7:25 with the message:

"All quiet during the night. Our patrols indicate Germans withdrew during the night. Sending further patrols now to verify this report.

"At 12:30 and 1:10 a.m. six shells from our own light artillery fell on us.

"Many wounded here whom we can't evacuate.

"Need rations badly.

"No word from D or F Companies.

"Whittlesey, Major, 308th Inf."

There was no mess call on this morning, all rations having been consumed the previous day. The wounded were suffering the most among the men, but even those still unscathed by the intense enemy fire of previous actions were succumbing to the stress of more than 48 hours of continuous activity that precluded rest or sleep, the numbing effects of the cold nights without shelter, and the gnawing agony of their empty stomachs. Rising above their hunger and fatigue, those who could still walk turned to the sad task of burying their dead before the afternoon sun could begin its own morbid work on the bodies that littered The Pocket.

The burial detail was soon halted by an enemy trench mortar to the northwest, and Whittlesey sent out a large patrol which succeeded in climbing to the top of the ridge just in time to repulse an enemy force that was positioning itself to lob grenades into the pocket below. At 10:55 Whittlesey released one of his two remaining pigeons to advise headquarters:

"Germans are still around us, though in smaller numbers. We have been heavily shelled by mortar this morning. Present effective strength (A, B, C, E, G, H, COS.)-175; K CO. 307-45; Machine Gun detachment-17; Total here about 235.

"Officers wounded: Lt. Harrington, Co. A; Captain Stromme, Company C; Lts. Peabody and Revnes, M.G. Battalion, Lt. Wilhelm, E Co., missing.

"Cover bad if we advance up the hill and very difficult to move the wounded if we change position.

"Situation is cutting into our strength rapidly. Men are suffering from hunger and exposure; the wounded are in very bad condition.

"Cannot support be sent at once?"

Support was indeed being sent, had been struggling to reach the Lost Battalion almost

from the moment it entered The Pocket, only to be turned back by the heavy German concentration around the ravine. The 3rd Battalion which had been held in reserve and constituted almost all that remained of the 308th Infantry Regiment had repeatedly thrown itself against the German defensive line. On the morning of October 4, the battalion's K Company had seen its advance halted by a well-placed enemy machine gun.



First Sergeant Benjamin Kaufman gathered a small patrol to

locate and destroy the well-concealed position. Moving in the direction from which the enemy fire emanated, he was separated from his patrol and proceeded alone until a bullet shattered his right arm.

The line of fire that had severely wounded him had also marked the enemy position. Despite his pain, First Sergeant Kaufman advanced alone, throwing grenades with his left arm and then charging into the enemy with an empty pistol until he had scattered all of the enemy gun crew but one man, a prisoner with whom he returned to friendly lines along with the enemy gun. For his valiant action, he was subsequently awarded the Medal of Honor.

The inability of the regiment, or for that matter the entire division, to reach the Lost Battalion with direct support left only one alternative...indirect support. This began arriving on the afternoon of Day 2 in The Pocket when American artillery shells began to fall across the enemy-infested ridge to the southeast. The trapped Americans welcomed the boom of the heavy shells at first, then became concerned as the rounds began to creep slowly down the slope. Then, as if to add insult to injury, one of the rounds landed in the pocket, to be followed by another...and another. The men of the Lost Battalion took shelter in their funk holes, only to find the intense friendly fire bury some men alive as the holes collapse under the explosive might of American artillery. Of equal concern was the devastating manner in which the explosions destroyed the trees and dense brush that had afforded the pocket camouflage from the enemy gunners. Across the small perimeter, hot shards of shrapnel flew to inflict even more casualties among the badly weakened composite battalion.

An Unlikely Hero



Major Whittlesey's last carrier pigeon was a true war veteran named

Cher Ami, French words meaning "dear friend". The Black Check Cock carrier pigeon was one of 600 birds owned and flown by the U.S. Army Signal Corps in France to carry important messages from the front lines. Already the pigeon had flown 11 important missions in the American sector around Verdun. Now Major Whittlesey scribbled out what might well be the most important mission Cher Ami would ever carry. It was brief and to the point:

"We are along the road parallel to 276.4.

"Our own artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us.

"For heaven's sake, stop it."

American artillery rounds continued to fill the air in and above The Pocket and had been joined by a German trench mortar. Into this beehive of deadly missiles, Major Whittlesey released Cher Ami and the last hope of his battalion. Stunned by the concussions around him, Cher Ami flew erratically, then lighted in the lower branches of a tree. With hope fading, the doughboys yelled encouragement to the small bird, then urged him to flight with some well-placed rocks.

Alas, the pigeon spread his wings and began to rise from the ravine. From hidden positions along the slope, the German machine gunners realized the small bird would be carrying important communications from the American commander below, and directed a fearsome volley towards Cher Ami.

Below, the doughboys held their breath, then groaned in despair as they watched their important messenger take a deadly hit, then begin a slow spiral towards the ground. Amazingly, somehow the little bird managed to spread his wings and level out, then rise again to fly over the rim of the valley and beyond the range of enemy bullets. All they could do was hope and pray.

Twenty-five minutes later the buzzer sounded at the pigeon loft at Division Headquarters. An American Signal Corps officer peered in to see which of the birds had arrived. There, lying on his back and covered with blood, lay Cher Ami. The badly

wounded pigeon had been blinded in one eye and shot in the breast leaving a hole the size of a quarter in his breastbone, from which dangled the few remaining tendons of his leg. Still attached to the nearly severed appendage was the silver capsule containing Major Whittlesey's message, which was promptly forwarded on to headquarters. Minutes later the deadly artillery barrage halted. Cher Ami had somehow survived to fly, badly wounded, through the hail of enemy fire. In less than half-an-hour, he had covered 40 kilometers to save the lives of more than 200 Americans. For his final mission of World War I, Cher Ami was awarded one of France's most honored medals, the French Croix de Guerre with palm.

Back in The Pocket, Major Whittlesey breathed a sigh of relief. His men were exhausted, starving, and many had been badly wounded. The loss of 30 more Americans to the errant fire from their own artillery had been as demoralizing as it had been deadly. A flicker of hope was ignited late in the afternoon when the sound of an American airplane was heard high over the ravine. Whittlesey instructed his men to set out two large, white marking panels so that the pilot could note the exact location of the pocket. The boost in spirit renewed the fighting vigor of the Lost Battalion, enabling them to turn back a determined enemy grenade attack before darkness fell.

By now ammunition was sorely depleted, and the three medical aidmen had run out of bandages for the wounded. Despite the knowledge that with the advent of the night the cold would again set in, the healthier doughboys removed their leggings so that bullet holes, shrapnel tears, and amputations could be bound up. Among the wounded was Lieutenant Holderman, suffering the first of what would eventually be three wounds in three days.

There were no rations and it had been at least 30 hours since any of the men in The Pocket had eaten even the most basic sustenance. Water too was running out. Undercover of night, Whittlesey dispatched patrols with canteens to draw water from a small pond below The Pocket. In the darkness, the thirsty doughboys occasionally heard a tinkering sound like a bell, an indication that a German bullet had struck the canteens and probably the brave soul who bore it. A few made it back with fresh water, but most were never seen again. What little water was obtained, was given to the wounded.

October 5, 1918 (Day 3)

Burial of the dead commenced with dawn on the third day. It was a slow, laborious task by men so weakened by hunger and lack of food or water they could barely walk, but with grim determination, they bent to the duty of at least providing their comrades some dignity in death.

Throughout the day the sound of additional airplane motors could be heard, and occasionally the men would catch fleeting glimpses of the American bi-planes circling high above the ravine. From time to time a small bundle attached to a long streamer would be tossed from the open cockpits, messages of hope for the beleaguered men of the Lost Battalion. All of them fell far afield of The Pocket, many of them dropping among the Germans. Major Whittlesey had chosen his defensive position well, hidden deep in the side of the sheer slope and protected from enemy artillery by the reverse slope. The terrain that sheltered him from the enemy, however, also hid him and his men from the eyes of the American observers overhead.

At 10 a.m. an American artillery barrage was launched against German positions, creeping across the ravine and then settling with effective determination on the ridge to the north from which the enemy had launched daily attacks. The implied message for the Americans under Whittlesey and McMurtry was: "We know where you are, and we know where the Germans are." To the optimistic few remaining in the command, it was proof positive that Cher Ami had somehow made it through the enemy fusillade the previous day to deliver his important message.

The Germans had placed a machine gun to cover the drinking hole below The Pocket, from which they quickly rained deadly fire on anyone approaching to fill the canteens. Reluctantly, Major Whittlesey sent orders that no more efforts would be mounted to recover water from the hole. It was futile, and it was deadly.

After more than 48 hours without food, men foraged among the brush for leaves, roots, anything to take the edge from their now aching stomachs. Lieutenant Holderman received a painful leg wound, and Captain McMurtry carried the stick from a potato masher (grenade) in his back. Both leaders ignored their pain to continue rounds among their survivors, giving words of hope and encouragement, and urging them to continue resistance against periodic sniper fire and occasional attacks throughout the day.

When the wounded finally succumbed, before they were buried the bandages were stripped from their broken flesh to be reused on other wounded who still clung to life. The filthy blood-and-puss soaked bandages were a certain shortcut to deadly gangrene, but there was little choice.

All along the American front line, the plight of the Lost Battalion was well known, though the details were certainly not understood. They had been the only American unit along the Argonne to breach the German defenses, and now they were paying the price for their success. Colonel Stacey had repeatedly thrown his 3rd Battalion against the enemy in an effort to reach Whittlesey, only to see the one remaining battalion of the 308th Regiment nearly decimated. He requested to be relieved rather

than order them back into the morass and was replaced on October 5th by Brigadier General Evan Johnson and then Captain Breckenridge. All along the front, other American units of the 1st Army fought fiercely against the enemy defensive line in hopes of breaking the stalemate and somehow relieving the pressure on the Lost Battalion.

Responding to telegraphed news reports of the battalion of Americans in the Argonne Forest, a copy editor back in the United States penciled in the word "lost", and the erroneous title was born. Spanish-American War veteran and former Pueblo (Colorado) Chieftain reporter Damon Runyon picked up on the title and began using it in his own news stories wired back home. By now a leading American War Correspondent, his stories perpetuated the label and thus ensured that it would stick for succeeding generations.

Struggling to survive in a small pocket in the Argonne Forest, the "Lost Battalion" was becoming a sensational story. Needless to say, reports of their situation were read and well known to the German forces that surrounded them. Major Whittlesey was writing a new chapter in World War I history. On the cold, rainy night of October 5 the new United States Army Air Service was poised to write a new chapter in history as well.

October 6, 1918 (Day 4)

Help from Above:

The 50th Aero Squadron

Not all of the pilots of World War I aviation were flamboyant, one-man fighting forces. The glamour boys were certainly the men who took to the clouds to dogfight with enemy airplanes, record a tally of victories, and claim the title "Ace". Of no lesser importance, however, despite the rather mundane nature of their work, were the pilots who flew to watch friendly troop movements, observe and report on enemy positions, and map terrain for those planning the tactics of ground warfare.

One of these observation units was the 50th Aero Squadron. Mustered at Kelly Field on August 6, 1917, the squadron was working under the 130th Field Artillery and flying out of its aerodrome at Remicourt near Verdun. The squadron adopted the image of a Dutch girl, painting it on the sides of their DH-4 airplanes.

The squadron conducted its missions from two-seat bi-planes designed by British Captain Geoffrey de Haviland and designated as the DH-4. The American version was a hardy airplane, well-constructed behind a powerful 400-hp Liberty engine with a top speed of 128 miles per hour. Two forward-firing, synchronized Marlin machine guns,

and two swivel-mounted Lewis machine guns provided both offensive and defensive firepower. The pilot flew in the forward cockpit with his observer behind. Between the two open cockpits, directly in the line of fire from attacking airplanes or ground fire, lay the fuel tank. It was perhaps, the only major design flaw in the sturdy airplane, but so fatal a flaw that the DH-4 was labeled the Flaming Coffin by the men who flew it.

The tenuous situation of the Lost Battalion resulted in requests for support from the 50th Aero Squadron. Initially, the aircraft flew observation or dropped messages, but on the morning of October 6, the squadron's DH-4 engines warmed for something previously unheard of in military aviation. On this day pilots of the 50th Aero Squadron would attempt the first air-drop in the history of U.S. military aviation, in efforts to resupply the battered and starving men tucked helplessly into a pocket of the slope above Charlevaux Creek.

Lt. Harold Goettler and Lt. Erwin Bleckley



Lt. Harold
Goettler

First Lieutenant Harold Goettler banked the wings of his DH-4 and pointed it towards the foreboding terrain of the Argonne Forest. The 28-year old Chicago native had enlisted in the Aviation Section of the U.S. Army fourteen months earlier, earning his wings and joining the 50th Aero Squadron in France less than two months earlier. Behind him sat Second Lieutenant Erwin Bleckley. During the same month in 1917 that Goettler had enlisted in the Army, Bleckley had been commissioned a second lieutenant in the National Guard of his own home state of Kansas.

Lieutenant Bleckley had arrived in France in March of 1918 as a member of the 130th Field Artillery. When the new US Army Air Service sent out a call for artillery officers willing to volunteer for observer's school at Tours, Bleckley had raised his hand, earned the single right wing of an aircraft observer, and joined the 50th Aero

Squadron on August 14th.

Goettler had piloted his first combat mission during the opening of the St. Mihiel Offensive on September 12th with Bleckley seated behind him. Over the following weeks, the two men operated as a team in the air, performing their usually mundane observation missions in the region. Today, things were different. The DH-4 carried a number of small, tightly bound parcels. The mission was to fly into the enemy's lair within the Argonne forest, drop low across the ravine bisected by Charlevaux Creek, and drop the badly needed supplies to the waiting arms of a lost battalion of doughboys below.

From the heights of the heavens, the rugged mountains and valleys of the Argonne Forest began to loom ahead. Goettler eased up on the stick and dropped the nose of his airplane to descend lower. Soon small white clouds could be seen coming from the trees as the enemy turned his weapons on the advancing DH-4. With a sharp eye, Goettler located the ravine through which the Charlevaux Creek wended its way, parallel a dirt road and railroad track. Enemy bullets swarmed past his head and tore through the canvas and plywood body of his airplane, but Lieutenant Goettler ignored the danger to reduce airspeed as he dropped even lower into the Argonne. Behind him, Lieutenant Bleckley scanned the broken forest for some sign of the Lost Battalion.

Though the general location of Whittlesey's pocket was known because of the messages sent out by carrier pigeon, the forest and the terrain hid the desperate doughboys from view. In moments the DH-4 was climbing out the other side of the ravine, and no sign of the American force had been noted.

Glancing to either side, Goettler noted the torn canvas of his airplane's wings. He had taken a brutal beating on the first pass, but the sturdy de Havilland had weathered the storm, and no rounds had found the airplane's Achilles heel between the two cockpits. Determined to deliver the badly needed food and ammunition, the intrepid pilot banked for a second pass. Coming in even lower this time, he was dangerously exposed to not only ground fire below, but to ground fire from the high sides of the ravine towering above him. He was virtually caught in a deadly crossfire from three directions: from both sides of the ravine as well as from overhead. Still, he ignored the threat, reducing airspeed and flying at a nearly tree-top level while Lieutenant Bleckley leaned from his exposed rear cockpit to drop the neatly tied parcels in the general vicinity of the dirt road, where they knew Whittlesey's men waited.

The first pass of Goettler's DH-4 had been five hundred feet above the valley floor. On the second pass, he had dropped to a dangerous 300 feet, while enemy fire literally ripped his airplane to shreds. Having dropped parcels but not having

located Whittlesey's pocket, he banked for a third pass, this time skimming tree-tops at less than two hundred feet. Bleckley continued to drop parcels until the last of them had fallen into what he hoped was the range of Whittlesey's men. With the wind whipping through the thin wires that held their DH-4 together, the two men returned to the aerodrome. There were more than 40 holes in the airplane, two of them large gashes ripped by large pieces of enemy shrapnel. While mechanics worked feverishly to repair the aircraft, other pilots of the 50th Aero Squadron flew out on similar missions.



Lt. Erwin
Beckley

Throughout the afternoon the ravine was filled with the roar of the big 400-hp Liberty engines and the crash of small arms and machinegun fire. Fourteen missions were flown before the afternoon was spent. Two DH-4s were shot down and crashed in no-man's land, and a third limped back to the aerodrome with its bloody pilot struggling to keep his airplane aloft long enough to reach safety. As shadows began to creep across the eastern horizon, dozens of small bundles lay scattered across the ravine, but no pilot had as yet made visual contact with the Lost Battalion. They could only hope that their best guesses had placed the bundles near enough that some could be recovered.

The mechanics had finished making temporary repairs to the battered DH-4 of Lieutenants Goettler and Bleckley, and the two men volunteered to make one more trip to the ravine before darkness fell. Lieutenant Goettler planned to fly even lower than before, intentionally drawing enemy fire in hopes of locating the hidden pocket by the simple process of elimination. Then Bleckley would be able to drop the packages directly into the midst of the starving soldiers. "Sir," Goettler informed Lieutenant Dan Morse before taking off on the final flight of the day, "Erv and I have decided

we're going to find that bunch of doughboys or die trying."

Half an hour later, Major Whittlesey, Captain McMurtry, Lieutenant Holderman, and the demoralized men of the Lost Battalion witnessed one of the most amazing air shows in history. From a distance, they heard the roar of yet another Liberty engine as the DH-4 approached. Slowly the roar grew louder, drowning out even the crash of the heavy enemy barrage. Wings vibrating against the laws of aerodynamics, struts whining against the whipping wind, Lieutenant Goettler was running the gauntlet so low at times it seemed the large DH-4 would actually touch the ground. Fighting the stick, the airplane would rise just in time to clear a tall tree, then drop on the other side to scour the terrain for any signs of the Americans. From time to time as he skillfully navigated the ravine, Goettler strafed enemy positions with his forward Marlin machine guns. Behind him, Lieutenant Bleckley ignored the whine of enemy fire zipping past his exposed torso to carefully sketch out the enemy positions. By mapping these, it was becoming much easier to locate the one spot in the ravine devoid of incoming fire. That had to be the location of The Pocket.

Nearing the far side of the ravine, Goettler pulled back sharply on the stick to clear the slopes, then banked for a second pass. To run the gauntlet again seemed sheer suicide, but perhaps with one more pass he could enable Bleckley to finish his map and pinpoint the Lost Battalion. Shadows were starting to creep across the floor of the ravine and the DH-4 dropped into the valley of death one more time. The forest literally blinked with the flashes of tracer rounds, and a pall of spent gun powder hung low to obscure the terrain. Still, Lieutenant Goettler stayed his course.



Enemy machine-guns fire shattered the windscreen, and

then the instrument panel disintegrated before Lieutenant Goettler's eyes in a hail of incoming bullets. Behind him, Lieutenant Bleckley's Lewis gun fell silent and the young soldier, formerly of the Kansas National Guard, slumped in his seat. With blood flowing unchecked from his own ruptured body, Goettler pulled back on the stick, gripping it tightly lest it slips from his bloody hands, and headed over the ridge to

the west. Moments later the battered airship pancaked with a loud crash in front of the French lines and slid sideways to a halt.

Surprised French infantrymen raced to the scene of the crash. "Ces aviateurs—ils sont morts!" shouted the first to arrive..."Both aviators are dead!" Quickly they set about removing the bodies for fear the airplane would burst into flames. The pilot was indeed dead, yet somehow the airplane had "landed itself". The legend of the Lost Battalion was soon supplemented by the legend of the Ghost Plane.



As the French pulled the body of Lieutenant

Bleckley from the rear cockpit, they found he was still breathing, though quite shallowly. Somehow the intrepid observer mustered the strength to press a piece of paper into a nearby hand before he died. When the paper was neatly pressed out it contained the detailed map of enemy positions in the ravine and the most accurate estimate of the Lost Battalion's location since they had entered the ravine.

For the incredible courage demonstrated that day by the pilot of a lumbering DH-4 and his back-seat observer, Lieutenants Bleckley and Goettler were awarded posthumous Medals of Honor, joining the ranks of World War I's two greatest American Aces, Frank Luke, and Eddie Rickenbacker. In the air, no mission was ever routine, and no aerial specialty mundane.

To the doughboys in The Pocket, the spectacle of multiple American airplane missions over the ravine on this fourth day of isolation brought a much-needed boost in morale. The sight of the falling bundles, which all knew would contain food, ammunition, and medical supplies, was greeted with great hope by men who had been without food for three days and had almost passed the point of further hope.

So exhausted and weak from hunger were the survivors still remaining, that they could no longer muster the strength to bury their dead. From time to time the men would attempt to toss a few handfuls of dirt over an exposed corpse or cover it with a brush, but for the most part, the bodies remained exposed where they fell.

Despite the glazed eyes and blank expressions that marked soldiers beyond further endurance, patrols had to be dispatched to reconnoiter the immediate area and report

back on enemy troops' movements and positions. Whittlesey selected some of his healthier soldiers and sent them in small groups to attempt to break through the enemy in an effort to reach headquarters. Three soldiers finally succeeded, the first men to leave the pocket since the morning of October 3. The rest of the scouts sent out were never heard from again.

The hope inspired by the sight of packages falling from the American DH-4s likewise quickly vanished. Virtually all of the bundles bearing the badly needed rations, ammunition, and bandages fell beyond The Pocket, come tantalizingly close, but still within the area controlled by the Germans. From time to time a hunger-crazed soldier would try to reach one of the nearest bundles, only to be shredded by enemy machine-gun fire as his comrades watched helplessly.

At 5 p.m. that evening the Germans mounted another heavy attack on the position. Over twenty minutes the doughboys expended what was nearly the last of their ammunition to repulse the drive. On the battalion's right flank Lieutenant Holderman watched as two men from the machine gun company in his sector fell to the enemy fire. Though twice wounded and suffering intense pain, he braved the frenzy of incoming grenades and rifle fire to move forward and carry the two back to safety. Then he went back to recover the gun lest it falls into the hands of the enemy. Holderman was himself wounded yet again.

The indomitable Captain McMurtry was now twice-wounded himself and fashioned a crutch from a tree branch to enable him to move from funk hole to funk hole to direct the fire of his men, distribute what little ammunition remained, and to shout words of encouragement. Two officers from the machine gun companies were killed, and only two of the machineguns remained of the original nine. It mattered little that these two were operational, no crews remained alive or unwounded to man them, and between the two guns there remained only five boxes of ammunition.

Somehow the battered unit rose to the level inspired by its intrepid leadership and turned back the enemy attack after nearly a half-hour of intense fighting. In the fading twilight, some of the men crept to nearer German bodies to strip them of rifles and bullets to replenish the nearly depleted American armory. Then darkness again settled in. It was the battalion's fifth night in the 4-acre pocket, and the fourth without food, shelter, or even overcoats. In the cold the wounded cried out in moans of agony they could no longer suppress. Beyond, in the dense forest, the weary men of the Liberty Division could hear the laughter of their enemy. The Germans had recovered many of the dropped parcels and dined heartily on bacon, bread, and even chocolate. The taunts and laughs of the enemy as they gorged themselves on the rations so sorely needed by the Americans cause hope and morale to sink to new lows.

Dehydrated soldiers, now crazed for lack of water, occasionally ventured back towards the stream beneath the pocket. Each was met with a hail of enemy gunfire, and the ranks of the living were reduced again. The situation had become so bad Captain McMurtry passed orders among the men, "I'm going to shoot the next man that leaves his position to get water."

No longer did Major Whittlesey measure the degeneration of his command in terms of days. Each hour wounded men died and unwounded men grew weaker. For the Lost Battalion, the end was more than near...it was imminent!

October 7, 1918 (Day 5)

Under orders from Major Whittlesey, no attempt was made to bury the dead on the fifth day. It was critical for every man to conserve what little strength remained in order just to defend the position. Patrols were again sent out, but these returned quickly after meeting intense enemy fire. Earlier reports during the night that the Germans had started pulling back appeared to be totally false.

Near 10 a.m. that morning, another patrol of eight soldiers left the pocket. Eighteen-year-old Private Lowell Hollingshead later wrote that the patrol left after a sergeant indicated that Major Whittlesey had requested eight volunteers to try and break through enemy lines and reach battalion headquarters. Other reports later stated the eight men had left their bunk holes in the early morning darkness, and on their own initiative, in a desperate effort to recover some of the food bundles that had fallen the previous day. Whatever the reason, eight weary doughboys found themselves slowly picking their way through the forest behind a full-blooded Indian from Montana that they had delegated to guide them out. Later Private Hollingshead marveled at how the young Native-American had picked their route, avoiding the most dangerous trails and carefully guiding them towards safety. But there was to be no safe route; the entire ravine was surrounded by Germans.

Private Hollingshead dropped to the ground and pressed his body as low into the dirt as humanly possible at the first sounds of incoming machine gunfire. Bullets kicked up dirt all around him, and ahead he watched as bullets ripped apart the head of the soldier ahead of him. "This is the last," he thought as the fusillade continued to rake the position, and fell into what he later described as "a sort of coma or daze". His mind had literally shut down.

Reality returned when a German soldier walked within six feet of the prostrate doughboy, leveling his Luger at the American's head. "Kamerad," the haggard young American shouted. It was the only German word he knew.

"He slowly lowered his gun, but it seemed several lifetimes to me and I can never tell you all the thoughts that passed through my mind in that brief space of time. I do, however, distinctly remember that my first thoughts were of my Mother, Dad, and home, and then a review of my kid days and a multitude of thoughts too numerous to mention flooded through my mind...The German lowered his gun (and) he smiled a great big smile, and what a lovely German he was. As he stood there in his gray uniform fully six feet tall, his smile seemed to broaden and broaden then he started walking toward me. I suppose the reason his smile is still in my mind is that it was so unexpected, as I had been taught to hate and expect fearful things from the Germans should they ever capture me.

"The German stepped over to me and started talking in his own language and pointed at my leg. I half turned and looked to where he was pointing and saw blood spouting from my leg near the knee. For the first time, I realized I had been hit. Then the other Germans appeared and began looking at my comrades and I knew then how they had fared. Of my seven Buddies, I found four had been killed outright and all the rest wounded. Our Indian guide was one of those who had been killed. With this realization a sickening sensation came over me and I thought to myself, 'this is not real, it is just a dream'."

After sending a runner to German headquarters to advise their commanders that four Americans had been captured, instructions arrived detailing a guard detail to bring the Americans to the HQ. Three of the wounded doughboys were wounded so badly they were carried out on stretchers. With his arm around the shoulders of one of his captors, Private Hollingshead was the only prisoner able to walk, or at least limp, to the unknown destination.

As the group neared the enemy headquarters, the prisoners were blindfolded for the last few hundred yards of the journey. When the blindfold was removed, Private Hollingshead found himself inside an enormous dug-out in the side of a hill. The command bunker was completely furnished, divided into small rooms, and had wooden floors. The most elaborate room had a modern sofa, several chairs, a phonograph record player, and an elaborate carved wooden table on which sat a typewriter. There he was greeted by a well-dressed German officer. In contrast to the condition under which he and his fellow soldiers had lived over the previous week, Private Hollingshead was stunned. "For the first time," he later wrote, "I had a deep feeling of resentment."

"How long since you have eaten?" the German officer inquired in perfect English.

"Five days," Hollingshead replied.

"Poor devil, you must be starved," the enemy commander stated.

"I certainly am!" came the response.

The German officer ordered food for his starving prisoner and proffered a cigarette from the case on his table, and had a doctor treat the man's leg wound. While Hollingshead wolfed down the first food, he had tasted in five days. "While I was eating," he recalled, "Prinz (the German commander) and two other officers started asking me questions about our outfit, but finding it of no avail as I was still hungrily gulping down the food and between bites told them I was too busy to talk to them."

While the young private was eating, his leg wound began bleeding again, and the surgeon returned to stop the bleeding. Then the interrogation, if one could call it that, began in earnest. There was no torture, no electrical shock treatment, none of the dramatic sparring of warring factions the term "interrogation" implies.

"What state are you from, Private?"

"Ohio," Hollingshead answered.

"Oh yes," stated Prinz, "I have been there to Cincinnati."

The German commander took his field glasses and walked to the doorway, motioning for Hollingshead to follow. "Look out there along the ravine. Can you see the rest of the men from your unit?"

Peering through the powerful binoculars, Hollingshead was surprised at how easily the American position could be seen through the glasses. "I'm sorry sir," he lied. "I can't see much of anything over there. I guess I'm just a little mixed up in my directions."

Lieutenant Prinz laughed, then instructed the weary American soldier to lay down on the couch and rest. It was an hour or two past noon, and as Hollingshead tried to relax, he could hear the sound of the typewriter on the table as the German commander began typing.

Lieutenant Prinz paused at the typewriter from time to time as he contemplated his composition. It was carefully drafted in perfect English. The man who commanded the German 76th Infantry Reserve Division that had so effectively maintained the gauntlet around the "Lost Battalion", had, in fact, lived in the United States before the war. For six years he had operated his own business in Seattle, Washington, returning to Germany when World War I broke out.

By mid-afternoon, the message had been completed, and Prinz awakened Private Hollingshead and asked him if he would deliver the message to the American commander in the ravine. Hollingshead asked to read the letter first, which was allowed. Throughout the earlier questioning, he had been careful to reveal nothing that would harm his comrades and had conducted himself honorably as a prisoner. Realizing he was

now being asked to deliver a request for surrender, he at first balked. Only when the letter had been redrafted to reflect the reluctance of the private to comply, did Hollingshead finally acquiesce.

Back in The Pocket, the men that remained had miraculously weathered another day of a nearly constant enemy sniper and machine gunfire. It was nearing 4 p.m. when mysteriously the hillside grew quiet. The men holding the left flank strained their eyes against the dense brush, wondering if the sudden cease-fire was the calm before a storm...prelude to an attack that would finally overwhelm their position. Something moved in the tree line. Tired eyes did their best to focus as something white appeared to move slowly towards the pocket. Finally, at the edge of the clearing, they could see a soldier in an American uniform, limping on the cane that enabled him to hobble slowly towards them while holding high a stick to which was tied a white cloth of truce. (After the war Private Hollingshead wrote of the cane, he had been given by Lieutenant Prinze, "That cane is still one of my dearest treasures.")

When at last Private Hollingshead reached the perimeter of The Pocket, he was passed down the line to the funk hole Major Whittlesey shared at the center with Captain McMurtry. Lieutenant Holderman was summoned to join the other two commanders for this new development. Reaching into his pocket, Hollingshead withdrew a neatly folded, white sheet of paper and handed it to McMurtry, then came to attention before his commanders. McMurtry read the letter, then passed it over to Major Whittlesey. The neatly typed surrender demand was addressed to:

**Commanding Officer
Second Battalion, 308th Infantry**

Sir:

The bearer of this present, Private Lowell R. Hollingshead has been taken by us. He refused to give the German Intelligence Officer any answer to his questions, and is quite an honorable fellow, doing honor to his Fatherland in the strictest sense of the word.

He has been charged against his will, believing that he is doing wrong to his country to carry forward this present letter to the officer in charge of the battalion of the 77th Division, with the purpose to recommend this commander to surrender with his forces, as it would be quite useless to resist any more, in view of the present conditions.

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 Hollingshead as an honorable man. He is quite a soldier. We envy you.

The German Commanding Officer



The offer was difficult to refuse, worded with polite reasoning, and

couched in praise for the American effort. The legend of the Lost Battalion as written in the media and retold in the years after the war was sensationalized with Major Whittlesey's purportedly defiant response: "Go to Hell!" Such is the way with a legend, it grows with the telling and retelling. The story of the Lost Battalion was so incredible, the facts really needed no embellishment. Such a response from the quiet mannered scholarly lawyer from New York would have been quite out of character. The fact of that moment is that no response, either verbal or written, was made. No response was necessary.



Major Whittlesey did immediately order the white panels that had

been set out to mark his position for American aircraft removed, so as not to be mistaken for a sign of surrender by the Germans. Some later reports quoted Captain McMurtry as responding: "We've got them licked or they wouldn't have sent this." It is doubtful that this account is any more accurate than the erroneous reports of Whittlesey's own defiant response, though such a statement would certainly be quite in keeping with McMurtry's personality and character.

Perhaps the most accurate record of the Lost Battalion's days in The Pocket was the unit history written shortly after the war by L. Wardlaw Miles and based upon reports from Major Whittlesey and Captain McMurtry, among others who were present. Wardlaw recounted:

A private expressed, in one exclamation, the answer of the entire command to the German letter. He asked one of the officers if it was true that they had been called upon to surrender. He was told that the rumor was correct.

"Why, the sons of _____!" he said as he pushed back his helmet.

In the trenches and funk holes, men who had been too emotionally drained and physically exhausted for five days, spoke for the first time. Into the forest, they hurled a chorus of defiance...."If you Germans want us, then come and get us!"

They did!

The lack of an answer from the American commanders was an answer in and of its self, perhaps more profound even than the fabled "Go to Hell!" Within half an hour the Germans launched their heaviest attack yet. Grenades fell from above with greater accuracy than the bundles dropped by American aircraft the previous day. Driven only by their anger at the surrender demand, and perhaps by the knowledge that they were doomed and had nothing left but to take as many enemies as possible with them to their grave in The Pocket, the doughboys fiercely repulsed the enemy for more than 20 minutes. Then, as the shadows deepened over the ravine, the enemy fire halted. Stillness fell across the Argonne, broken only by the mournful cries of the wounded.

In their funk hole at the center of the American position, Major Whittlesey and Captain McMurtry looked at each other apprehensively. The sudden stillness on the heels of the vicious attack was as ominous as it was eerie. It was a few minutes after 7 p.m. that a shadow moved swiftly towards them. The two officers gripped their weapons tightly as they watched the quick-moving shape approach. It was a breathless runner with a stunning message. An American officer and a few doughboys had just entered The Pocket from the right flank. They were men of the 307th Infantry, Lieutenant Holderman's regiment. "The officer wants to see the commanding officer," the runner whispered.

Quickly Major Whittlesey followed the runner back to the right flank. Before him stood Lieutenant Richard Tillman and a few of his men. The officer informed Major Whittlesey that Companies A, B, and M of the 307th Infantry Regiment had entered the ravine and waited in the trees only a few yards distance.

At last, the Lost Battalion had been found!

October 8, 1918 (Day 6)

After Lieutenant Tillman met with Major Whittlesey, the three companies from the 307th Infantry Regiment were guided into The Pocket to reinforce the Lost Battalion. The enemy forces, now aware of the successful breach of their defensive line by other American units, began withdrawing throughout the night. Within an hour of the relief, rations were passed through the lines and to the starving men who ate for the first time in five days. Along with the rations came medical supplies and improved medical attention to the wounded.

At dawn, more rations arrived along with new reinforcements. Under Lieutenant James Halligan, the unit's senior Chaplain, the incoming soldiers buried the dead. Ambulances arrived along the Charlevaux road above The Pocket, and the wounded were quickly transported to field hospitals. By mid-afternoon, Major Whittlesey assembled all those who remained alive and able to function, and the remnants of the composite unit marched slowly back to Regimental Headquarters. Their ranks numbered only 194 men from the more than 700 men who had started the assault, and the 554 men who had been trapped in The Pocket five days earlier.

Upon being relieved after the 5-day ordeal above Charlevaux Brook, Major Whittlesey was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. He was promptly submitted for the Medal of Honor, and in turn, recommended both Captain McMurtry and Lieutenant Holderman for Medals of Honor as well. Whittlesey and McMurtry's awards were announced on December 2, 1918.



Following the November 11th Armistice, many of the

doughboys returned home in time for Christmas, Lieutenant Colonel Whittlesey himself arriving back in his home state for the holidays. On Christmas Day a ceremony was held on Boston Common, and the Medal of Honor pinned to the tunic of the mild-mannered, New York attorney. It was the first Medal of Honor of World War I to be presented to a member of the United States Army. Lieutenant Holderman's Medal of Honor was announced in War Department Orders two years later.

The story of the Lost Battalion became perhaps the most talked about and written about the event of World War I, growing more sensational with each retelling. Sadly, the bare facts alone were sufficient to inspire. Americans have always sought for heroes, and Charles Whittlesey was hesitantly thrust into that role. But, as surely as we need heroes to inspire us, a sad fact of human nature is that heroes also inspire jealousy and often resentment.

Yesterday's hero all too often becomes today's whipping boy.

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Whittlesey was honorably discharged from the United States Army the day before his Medal of Honor was announced. He attempted to return to the practice of law, but the legend of the Lost Battalion would not let him go. There were rumors and innuendo that Whittlesey was himself, personally responsible for the tragedy. Some pointed to the minor error in the map coordinates he had sent back by carrier pigeon; others claimed the unit had been trapped only because the Major had overzealously pushed his soldiers ahead of all others. The fact that Major Whittlesey had simply followed orders to the letter, no more and no less, or that the general location of The Pocket was well known in headquarters, could not stop these sad rumors.

In 1921 the reluctant hero boarded the S.S. Toloa, a vacation liner to Cuba, to escape the war that wouldn't end from him. During the voyage, he penned a letter bequeathing the original copy of the German surrender request written by Lieutenant Prinz to his friend, George McMurtry. He left his Cross of the Legion of Honor to his closest friend, a former classmate at Harvard, and law partner J. Bayard Pruyn. On

November 27, 1921, Charles Whittlesey finally completed his escape from The Pocket of a steep slope in the Argonne Forest when he leaped from the rail of the S.S. Toloa and vanished forever in the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean.

George McMurtry also returned to civilian life, becoming a solid rock of hope for the men of the Lost Battalion as they attempted to put the war behind them and get on with their lives. Until his death on November 22, 1958, he personally funded regular reunions for survivors of the Lost Battalion.

Lieutenant Nelson Miles Holderman returned to his home state of California, rejoined the National Guard, and was appointed a colonel. In 1926 California's governor appointed Holderman Commandant of the California Yountville Soldier's Home, where he continued to serve veterans until his death on September 3, 1953.

In 1919 [Cher Ami](#), the carrier pigeon that had carried the last message out of the pocket died from his own war wounds. Over the next two decades, the bird became a legend in his own right, taught and remembered by school children throughout the United States, his name as familiar as the names of Eddie Rickenbacker and Sergeant York.

Last year (2001), nearly a century after the men of the 307th and 308th Infantry Regiment made their heroic stand in The Pocket, the most written about the battle of World War I was recreated for a new generation of Americans by the Arts & Entertainment. From Major Whittlesey to Lieutenant Prinz, these heroes of American history are still remembered in the made-for-TV movie...as is Cher Ami.

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