

The Lost Battalion

(The 308th Infantry during the Argonne Offensive October 1918)

During the American involvement in World War I, there were various battles that caught the American public's attention, but none were like the one like the story of the "Lost Battalion". This battalion consisted of about five hundred men of the 308th Infantry of the 77th Division along with attachments from other units. The commander of the 1st Battalion 308th Infantry Regiment was Maj. Charles Whittlesey, a former New York City lawyer. The 308th also consisted of attachments from the 306th Machine Gun Battalion and K Company from the 307th Infantry for their mission. This mission was to capture the Charlevaux Ravine in the Argonne Forest during the Meuse-Argonne offensive in October 1918. The offensive through the Argonne Forest would be a tough battle for the Americans since the Germans had dug themselves in over the last four years. Also the rough terrain would add to the difficulty in any attack in the Argonne. In theory, if the AEF broke through here, they could punch a hole all the way past the main lateral rail line the German Army needed to keep the front supplied. A major break through here would then be catastrophic for the Germans. When the attack commenced, Maj. Whittlesey's battalion reached its objective but because of the failure of the units on his flanks to maintain momentum with him, the Germans eventually surrounded the battalion. Members of Maj. Whittlesey's surrounded unit fought off repeated attacks by the Germans to drive them out which consisted of five days of continuous fighting. Five days later friendly forces would finally fight their way through and link up with Maj. Whittlesey's mixed unit. Of the five hundred men walked in the Argonne with Maj. Whittlesey only around 195 walked out with him after the five day siege.

The 308th Infantry Battalion was part of the 77th Division, which was originally raised primarily from New York City draftees, which gave the division its name of the 'Metropolitan Division'. These draftees consisted of many different types of men and they filled Camp Upton on Long Island in September 1917. They were mainly from the East Side of the City, so this group of soon to be soldiers were a real melting pot of men. Whittlesey graduated from Harvard Law School in 1908. He then went into practice with the firm Murry, Prentice & Howard. After a few years, Whittlesey went into practice with his friend at the firm Pruyn & Whittlesey in New York City. In August 1916, Whittlesey graduated from the military training camp at Plattsburgh, New York. He was then placed on active duty in August 1917 and reported to Camp Upton with the 308th Infantry of the 77th Division. Immediately upon his arrival to camp Upton, Whittlesey was to serve with the Headquarters Company of the 1st Battalion 308th Infantry Regiment.

The Meuse-Argonne Offensive in 1918 was going to be an attack on some 24 mile stretch that consisted of the 77th Division. During this attack the 77th Division would eventually be the only division that actually fought through the Argonne Forest. The 308th Infantry was starting to get much needed replacements, as well as the whole 77th Division, from the 40th Division which was made up of men from places like Montana, Washington State and Minnesota. One doughboy replacement from the 40th described being thrown in with the New Yorkers like-

- " We walked to a place called Bourges. That's where they was gathering up men for the 77th Division. It had just made a forced stand at the Chateau Thierry sector and at Vesle and a lot of the division had been killed and taken prisoner. They throwed us western men in there to fill up the division. I was put in the 308th Infantry, Company H and it wasn't any time before we was part of the 77th and going over the top".

Maj. Whittlesey of the advance Battalion was very concerned about his men when he received his orders. He had pointed out the difficulty of the land and the German defense to make such attack would lead to his battalion suffering unacceptable casualties since that many of his replacements were green inexperienced troops that hardly knew how to work their rifles. That point had been already argued up to the Division Commander General Alexander and the orders from Army command was to drive on no matter what the cost. At the same time the French were attacking and their drive had sucked in all the Germans that could do any damage by flank attack on the 308th. On October 2nd Maj. Whittlesey was advancing behind an artillery barrage regardless of losses intent on reaching his objectives he was ordered, the Charlevaux mill area. The 308th was eventually surrounded due to the inability of the units to his left and right to advance equal to Maj. Whittlesey's command. There were two reasons why he could not try to move to safer ground even if Maj. Whittlesey had wished to. First, he was ordered to hold this position until the other elements came abreast of him, but because they didn't, the Germans were able to filter through both flanks and got in the 308th's rear. The Germans then strung wire across the path through the ravine linking up the two sections of the German trench system.

In the morning of October 3rd, the men trapped in the pocket had an encouraging event, K Company of the 307th led by Cpt. Holderman which gave 96 more men to the defense. With this added force, Whittlesey placed Holderman's company on the right side of the pocket and later tried to send his company south across the Charlevaux Brook to determine if he could get back to the 77th Division on the east side of the ravine. This could not happen since Holderman ran into a large number of Germans it became evident that they were surrounded by a powerful force. Later on the Germans tried to shell the American positions but it was unsuccessful due to the fact the pocket was on a reverse slope which the German artillery could not fire effectively due to the trajectory needed to hit them. This led to the first carrier pigeon message being sent at 8:50 A.M.

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

At 10:45 A.M. Maj. Whittlesey sent another carrier pigeon that told regimental command

-that their runner post were broken, patrols east ran into Germans, located German mortar and sent platoon to get it, taken prisoner who says his company of 70 men were brought here last night from rear by trucks, German machine gun constantly firing on valley to our rear and E Company (sent to meet D and F) met heavy resistance with at least 20 casualties and two squads under Lt. Leake have just fallen back here.

At 3 P.M. came the first organized enemy attack from the ridge above the pocket. The Germans threw a shower of grenades to explode at the edge of the Charlevaux Roadway where the defending companies rushed to their forward firing lines. The fire from the rifles and chauchat

machine guns poured into the bushes above the road and then the attack ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The Germans commence another attack before 5 P.M.

- "It combined rushes against the left and right flanks with a second grenade attack from the ridge. The ravine rang with echoes of machine guns, chauchats and rifles. Our machine guns worked splendidly and the enemy must have suffered heavy losses from this source alone."

MAJ. Whittlesey sent out his next carrier pigeon during this attack which stated that the Germans were on the cliff north of them and the situation was very serious. In this message he also reported casualties, remaining unit strength and a request for much needed supplies. The men in the pocket prepared for night. The men who had food shared with the men who didn't have time to grab some prior to the initial attack. The night of October 3rd passed quietly except for several scouts that were sent out and either returned wounded or didn't return at all.

On October 4th, Maj. Whittlesey sent out patrols from each flank and they hadn't gone 500 yards before they were driven back by heavy machine gun fire and rifle fire from the high ground behind the position. AT 7:25 A.M. and 10:55 A.M. carrier pigeons were sent back to Headquarters of the division stating that the men were suffering from hunger and exposure, the commands present combat effective strength, the number of wounded, and a request for support to be sent immediately. During the afternoon, the men were surprised to see a friendly artillery barrage that began to fall on the ridge to the southeast but then worked its way down the ravine and up to the Whittlesey's unit which devastated the already suffering battalion. They watch as over 30 of their men died in the friendly artillery barrage. This is when Whittlesey sent his last pigeon with this 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"

When the shells started to fall less frequently, the Germans launched an attack from the ridge above. The Germans were beaten back but a few patrols succeeded in penetrating the line of outpost. The battalion signalers reported they believed they had succeeded in attracting the attention of an American plane flying over head with two white battalion panels in the open spaces between the trees. The cold and hunger caused intense suffering amongst the men and the rain didn't help with the situation. The sound of American Chauchat rifles could be heard from the ridge to the south, this was a source of encouragement that gave hope.

The morning of October 5th brought the routine of more patrols and burying the dead. The outpost on the north reported seeing 200 Germans moving south to the hills in the rear of the position. Around 10A.M. another artillery barrage began. It, like the previous day, began to creep down the slope. Then the barrage lifted and started again on the ridge to the north where the Germans prepared for their daily attacks. Whittlesey had known then that his carrier pigeon had gotten through to their headquarters the day before. Then for twenty minutes, the Germans laid down machine gun fire on every part of ground the surrounded command had. This was followed by a German grenade attack from the north which was quickly repulsed. Repeatedly the men had to run from their holes to their positions on the edge of the Charlevaux road to route attacking forces.

- In the area for the wounded, the medics were using whatever they could for bandages including ones from the dead. They were even using web cartridge belts to cover wounds. Basically whatever they could find for the wounded to bind their wounds.

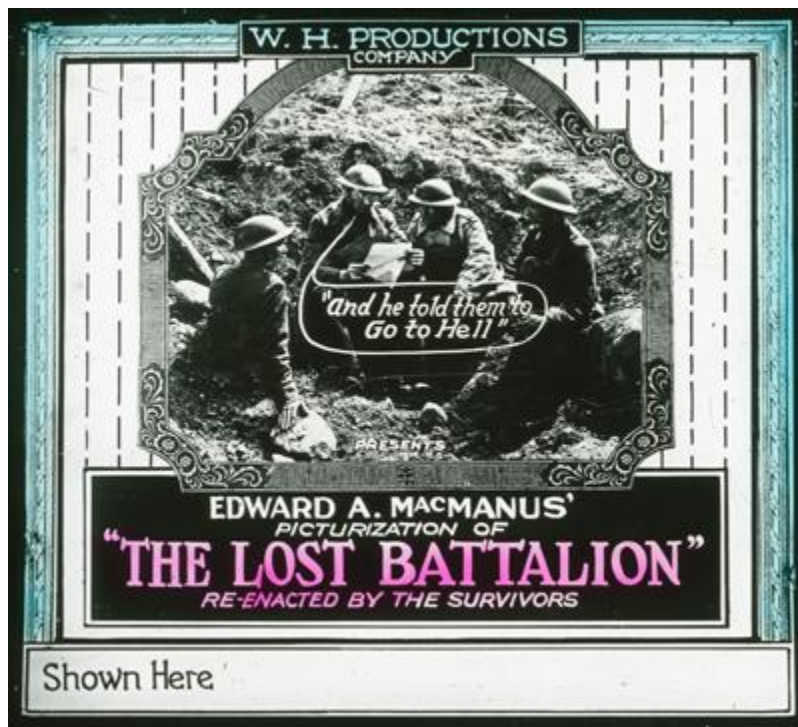
The night of the 5th came with another drizzling rain and a bitter cold which added to the suffering of the wounded and the tired defenders since they had hardly any food or sleep for 4 days.

The morning of the 6th found the men of the 308th too weak from lack of food to bury their dead. The dead were either covered with branches or left where they had died. A determined effort to get patrols through the German lines from different parts of the position took place. They were ordered to try their skill to work their way back to regimental headquarters. One of the three who did make it through was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions. The day consisted of trench mortar, machine gun and sniper fire. The Germans attempted another heavy grenade attack around 5 P.M. and this attack was halted after twenty minutes of vigorous fire from the defenders rifles. Whittlesey's command lost two officers with the machine gun attachments. One thing that was remembered from the German grenade attack was that a potato masher grenade had struck Captain McMurtry and since he was already wounded in the knee by shrapnel, he refused to go down. Now Captain McMurtry continued the fight with the handle of the grenade sticking out of his back. Another interesting event that happened this day was that the air service tried to drop much needed supplies to the defenders but they fell in the German lines. The men didn't get the much needed supplies but they did know that their regiment knew where they were.

October 7th brought rain with it and as the men in the pocket would find out later, German Strosstruppen (Storm troopers). The remnants of the 308th had barely any strength left to fight the surrounding enemy troops. At 4 P.M. a surrender note came to the command from the Germans carried by a private from H Company that had tried to get food from the airdrops and was captured. Maj. Whittlesey read the note aloud and the officers smiled since they took the note as a sign the enemy was weakening and had resorted to an appeal. Whittlesey told the men to take down the white airplane panels to prevent confusion as to their purpose because of the possible implications of the surrender note. The last German attack consisted of the Strosstruppen which used Minenwerfers, potato masher grenades, snipers and at the end flamethrowers. The enemy hoped to end all hopes of resistance with the use of flamethrowers at the end. Something almost strange happened on the part of the defenders during this last attack. The emotion of the dead-weary, starving, wounded, hysterical men was transformed into a wild rage that contained a furious desire for vengeance. Wounded men rose from their holes and stumbled to their firing lines while those that could not walk loaded rifles. Everywhere the vengeance crazed defenders drove the German attack back. On the right flank, Cpt. Holderman broke a whole wave of Germans by himself with the help from a sergeant. On the left flank the flamethrowers were stopped by riflemen shooting the ones with the tanks of liquid. This ended the attack on the last day of the pocket being surrounded because shortly after they were finally relieved by the men of the 307th Infantry of the 77th Division.

In conclusion, Maj. Whittlesey led over 550 men into the Argonne Forest and when it was all over, he walked back with 194 officers and men of the mixed unit. Killed were 107 men and officers. No blame was placed on Maj. Whittlesey for the events of the attack in Argonne Forest. His battalion's position resulted from the inability of the units on his left and right flanks to achieve the same level of momentum as did the 308th. With Maj. Whittlesey being a civilian soldier and following his orders to take the Charlevaux Mill area regardless of the costs, he did the best that he could with the situation he was in and with what little experience a nonprofessionally trained officer could do. With the stubborn defense of their position, allied forces were able to break through to them. Roughly five weeks later, the war was over. Unfortunately Charles Whittlesey ended his life on 26 November 1921. Some thought it was due to some guilt he had from the events while surrounded in the pocket in the Argonne Forest. Those that served with him thought that he was a casualty of the war and that he could never get rid of the constant reminders of the horrors of war that he experienced. Either way, Charles Whittlesey was always loved and respected by the men he served with in the 1st Battalion 308th Infantry Regiment.

Two American movies, one in 1919 and the other in 2001 both entitled 'The Lost Battalion', were subsequently made on Maj. Charles Whittlesey's regiment.



1919 Film



2001 Film

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