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## Siege in the Argonne

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# Siege in the Argonne

By James Legg

Like Sergeant York's 82<sup>nd</sup> Division, the 77<sup>th</sup> Division was engaged in the great Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the largest and final AEF (American Expeditionary Force) offensive of the Great War. The Meuse-Argonne began on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1918 and raged until the end of the war on November 11<sup>th</sup>. About 1.2 million Americans eventually participated in the offensive, of whom about 27,000 were killed and 96,000 were wounded, gassed, or otherwise disabled.



Fig. 1: Major Charles Whittlesey in 1918. In 1921, Whittlesey attended the dedication ceremonies for the new Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery. Shortly thereafter he booked passage on a holiday cruise to Cuba. On the first night at sea, Whittlesey had drinks in the bar, said goodnight, then stepped outside, and jumped overboard. (National Archives)

The 77<sup>th</sup> Division was comprised of draftees, most from New York, many of them recent immigrants. On September 26, 1918, they found themselves on the far left (west) flank of the American front in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, attacking north within the dense, hilly, and well-defended Argonne Forest. After a good start on the 26<sup>th</sup>, the 77<sup>th</sup> made little progress for the remainder of September. The division suffered heavy casualties, and there was significant confusion in communication and command. Neither side had a clear picture of what was going on, and neither side was able to maintain

a continuous front line. It was in this environment that a fresh Allied surge began on the morning of October 2<sup>nd</sup>.

On the left of the 77<sup>th</sup> Division advance, was a command consisting of elements of two battalions of the 308<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, led by Major Charles Whittlesey. In civilian life, Whittlesey was a Wall Street attorney. By nightfall, his force had skirmished its way through, and well beyond, the confused German front without encountering a main line of resistance. The Americans crossed a deep, east-west ravine and dug in for the night on the northern slope. Meanwhile, the French division attacking to Whittlesey's left, and the 307<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment on his right, were unable to make comparable penetrations. On October 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Germans re-established their front line well to the south, and the "Lost Battalion" was trapped.

The Germans lay siege to the position for five days, raking it with rifle and machinegun fire, showers of grenades and trench mortar shells, and, finally, flame throwers. The defenders suffered terribly from thirst and hunger, and there was no helping the wounded. The low point was probably when Allied artillery blasted the Americans with an accurate and sustained barrage. Whittlesey received and rejected a formal surrender demand from the enemy. The siege was well underway before the 77<sup>th</sup> Division command figured out what had happened, much less exactly where Whittlesey was located. The response was disjointed and ineffective, resulting in a series of firefights along the German front, but there was no relief for the Lost Battalion. Finally, American progress to the east of the Argonne Forest compelled the Germans to abandon their front facing the 77<sup>th</sup> Division, and on October 8<sup>th</sup> relieving units reached Whittlesey's position.

About 550 Americans were trapped in the pocket. When relief arrived, 190 of them were able to

walk out. Another 190 lay wounded in the position, along with 107 dead. Sixty-three men were missing. In the context of 77<sup>th</sup> Division operations, the Lost Battalion affair was a costly fiasco that contributed nothing to the Allied advance. The story quickly caught the popular imagination, however, and it was certainly a propaganda victory. Whittlesey and three others were awarded the Medal of Honor for the action. For many years, the Lost Battalion held legendary status rivaling that of Sergeant York, but as the centennial of the Great War looms, it is now nearly gone from the national memory.

## Further Reading

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Fig. 2: A view in the Argonne Forest in October, 2012, 94 years after the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. (Photo by James Legg)