

Lost Battalion Background Essay

Between the uneven ground, ravines, and streams of the Argonne Forest to the east and Meuse River to the west was a landscape of fields and rolling hills. It was in this setting that the U.S. Army faced entrenched German troops with the goal of breaking through German lines and proceeding through northern France to the borders of Belgium and Luxembourg.

One of the instrumental divisions in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive was the 77th Division, sometimes referred to as the Statue of Liberty Division, as it was mainly composed of soldiers from New York City. The men, from varied ethnic backgrounds, represented the diverse culture of urban America at the turn of the century. Mixed in with the New Yorkers were some farm boys from Montana and Wyoming. The men learned to work together in spite of their differences when separated from other American and French forces for five days.

On September 26, 1918 the First Army ordered the 77th Division to advance through the Argonne Forest. Additional American troops, joined by the French, proceeded to drive north. The Germans had the advantage of holding important high ground and had caused many Allied casualties as a result. The Americans had plenty of spirit and courage; it was training and experience they lacked. Most reinforcements in the region were recent draftees. Some had never fired a gun or even seen a grenade and Maj. Charles White Whittlesey's unit was no different. In fact, Whittlesey was a Harvard trained attorney, practicing banking law in New York City before joining the army.^[i]

Whittlesey's battalion advanced toward their objective until they began encountering severe German resistance.^[ii] The Lost Battalion found itself in a wooded ravine, surrounded by hostile Germans by the evening of October 2.^[iii]

The men dug into the side of a ravine just short of their objective and waited for reinforcements from the rear. Whittlesey and his men were in terrain that was defensible, but they faced harassment from all directions by German troops. Food rations were in short supply and soon the only available water would be from a muddy creek, closely guarded by German snipers and machine gun nests. Ammunition was also dwindling quickly.

Brig. Gen. Evan Johnston contacted Gen. Robert Alexander to alert him that Whittlesey's men were

in danger of becoming completely cut off. However, Alexander had received positive reports from other regions and assumed that there were Allies in the area to protect Whittlesey's flank.^[iv] With the runner and phone systems down, Whittlesey turned to the few remaining carrier pigeons that remained. He sent three pigeons to headquarters with desperate messages regarding the perilous situation of his men and requested assistance from American artillery.

By nightfall on October 3, 25 percent of Whittlesey's force had become casualties.^[v] They had no medical supplies and no one qualified to render aid. Despite this, Whittlesey and his men continued to hold their position, refusing to surrender or withdraw.

The soldiers of the Lost Battalion heard the sound of shells landing on the southern slope of the valley by mid-afternoon on October 4. Initially, the men's hopes soared as they thought the sounds were coming from American artillery attacking the Germans behind them. Whittlesey soon realized that American forces were actually hitting his men.^[vi] He was forced to send his last pigeon with the message "Our artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us. For Heaven's Sake stop it."^[vii]

On October 8, reinforcements finally reached the unit. Of the more than 600 men trapped in the ravine, only 190 were physically able to walk out of the woods, 190 were wounded, 110 were dead, and 60 missing.^[viii] Yet it was ultimately the ravine that saved so many of them. The terrain provided the Lost Battalion with conditions necessary to defend itself in spite of being surrounded by German troops.

^[i] Robert. J. Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion* (Wisconsin: American Expeditionary Foundation, 2007), 42.

^[ii] Edward Lengel, *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918* (New York: Holt, 2007), 224.

^[iii] American Battle Monuments Commission, *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe* (Washington, DC.: Center of Military History United States Army, 1995), 337.

^[iv] Lengel, *To Conquer Hell*, 230.

^[v] Ibid.

^[vi] Ibid.

^[vii] Ibid., 231.

^[viii] James B. Legg, "Siege in the Argonne." *Legacy* 17, no. 1 (2013):15-15, 15.