

# Whittlesey, Charles White

By [Susan Bragg](#)

Whittlesey, *Charles White*  
American soldier, war hero and lawyer  
Born 20 January 1884 in Florence, United States  
Died presumed 26 November 1921 in Atlantic Ocean, New York en route to Cuba

**Lieutenant Colonel Charles Whittlesey served in a unit of the U. S. Army's 77<sup>th</sup> Division known as the "Lost Battalion" as it was trapped by German forces during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Whittlesey received the U.S. Congressional Medal of Honor in 1918 for his leadership but committed suicide in 1921.**

## Table of Contents

[1 Early Life](#)

[2 Military Service](#)

[3 Post-War Life](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

## Early Life

Charles White Whittlesey (1884-1921) was raised in an upper-middle class household in Pittsfield, Massachusetts that prided itself on family traditions of civic commitment and military service. Whittlesey seemed to exemplify early 20<sup>th</sup> century American progressive manhood values due to his emphasis on cosmopolitan social engagement and personal duty. While at Williams College, he joined the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) and the Delta Psi fraternity, participated in campus literary activities, and was an enthusiastic football fan. Classmates nicknamed him "Chick" and "The Count," reflecting his reputation as friendly but enigmatic.

After graduating from Williams in 1905 and from Harvard Law in 1908, Whittlesey began a promising career as a Wall Street lawyer. He also circulated in liberal social circles thanks to his friendship with [Max Eastman \(1883-1969\)](#), his college roommate and editor of the socialist journal *The Masses*. Although a committed [pacifist](#), Whittlesey broke with Eastman and other American socialists in 1915 over the emerging conflicts of the Great War. Believing that the [USA](#) must stop [Germany's](#) militarization, Whittlesey participated in the Plattsburgh Movement, a voluntary military preparation effort endorsed by American political leaders opposed to President [Woodrow Wilson's \(1856-1924\)](#) stand for [neutrality](#).

## Military Service

In the fall of 1917, as the U.S. reversed course and officially entered the Great War, Whittlesey joined the army and was appointed captain within the 77<sup>th</sup> Division at Camp Upton on Long Island, New York. Known popularly as the "Melting Pot" or the "Metropolitan" Division, the 77<sup>th</sup> was comprised of [ethnic working class](#) men from New York City, including Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, Jewish Americans, and Chinese Americans, many of whom were immigrants. Drawing upon racial and ethnic

[stereotypes](#) of the time, many army officials were skeptical of both the fighting ability of the men and their ability to unite effectively within the unit. Whittlesey himself privately expressed concerns about his diverse group of men but publicly emphasized a neutral vision of military discipline, order, and duty. If the men of the 77<sup>th</sup> saw him as a member of a mainstream American elite, they also believed he was fair and consistent as a commander.

Whittlesey and the 77<sup>th</sup> Division shipped off to [France](#) in September 1917 as part of the [American Expeditionary Forces](#) (AEF). Initially sent to Flanders, the men trained with British forces experienced in trench warfare before entering frontline combat in the Baccarat sector in July 1918. After a brief respite, the division moved on to combat in the Vesle sector and later participation in the Oise-Aisne Offensive from mid-August to mid-September 1917. Heavy [casualties](#) during these battles weakened the division but also gave soldiers greater experience and confidence in battle. Whittlesey was promoted to major in the 308<sup>th</sup> [Infantry](#) due to his demonstrated organizational skills and calm behavior under fire.

In late September 1918, the 77<sup>th</sup> Division was ordered to the frontlines as part of the American-led Meuse-Argonne Offensive in northern France. General [John Joseph Pershing \(1860-1948\)](#) hoped to crack the German lines and force a retreat but the heavy entrenchment of the Germans in the Argonne forest slowed the initial phase of the offensive. On 1 October, Division commander Major-General [Robert Alexander \(1863-1941\)](#) directed Whittlesey's 308<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the 307<sup>th</sup> Infantry headed by Captain [George McMurtry \(1876-1954\)](#) to lead an attack through the Ravine d'Argonne. Traveling with strict orders not to retreat, the two units were charged with taking control of the strategic Binarville-La Viergette road deep in the forest. Whittlesey expressed concern about the lack of rations, cold weather, and reliability of support troops but dutifully led his men forward despite constant pressure from German gunners. The 554-man combined unit was finally forced to bunker down on 2 October in the "Pocket," a hillside portion of the Charlevoix Valley. This group would become known as the "Lost Battalion," cut off from direct communication with American headquarters and under constant attack from German forces higher up the valley walls.

Whittlesey did his best to maintain both order and optimism for his men but there were no rations left and no source of clean water unless runners braved German fire to move downhill toward Charlevoix Brook. To make matters worse, the Lost Battalion was hit by friendly fire on 4 October and American efforts to drop rations by air missed their mark and landed among the Germans. Despite the brutality of the situation, Whittlesey rejected a German directive to surrender sent via an American [prisoner of war](#) on 7 October. Shortly after this final stand, American support troops arrived to rescue the Lost Battalion. By this time, the men had sustained over 360 casualties, including 109 deaths.

## Post-War Life

The [American military press](#) widely circulated the story of the Lost Battalion, emphasizing Whittlesey's steady leadership in order to maintain home front support for the war. Whittlesey was quickly promoted to lieutenant colonel and relieved from active duty so that he could be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in the U.S., the first such award given during World War I. While uncomfortable about leaving his division still involved in the fighting, Whittlesey played his role as a returning war hero, speaking publicly about the bravery of his "Melting Pot" troops. He continued this service in the following years, supporting [Red Cross](#) and soldiers' aid concerns and was promoted to colonel of a New York reserve unit in 1921.

If Charles Whittlesey returned home to popular acclaim, the trauma of his experiences remained with him. Family and friends reported that he refused to talk about his personal experiences even as he participated in public recognition of the Great War. Shortly after serving as a pall bearer in a ceremony to honor the Unknown Soldier at Arlington, he booked steamship passage to Havana, Cuba and presumably jumped to his death late on 26 November 1921. His body was never located but letters and business documents for family members were found in his room, along with the original German letter requesting the Lost Battalion's surrender.

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