

The lost battalion of ww1



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

It was October 2 - 7 1918 in the Meuse-Argonne that American Forces of the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 308th Infantry, Kilo Company from the 307th Infantry, and sections from a brigade machine-gun battalion, found themselves in a very ominous situation. On October 2, 1918 Major Whittlesey was moving his men forward and had managed to reach his objective by late afternoon. The problem was his advance was "the only forward advance on the entire front of First Army from the Argonne Forest to the Meuse" on this day (Ferrell, 14). At the time he did not know it, but he was forward of everyone and would be stuck on a slope that came to be known as "The Pocket" for the next week (Ferrell, 14). On the way to his objective, Major Whittlesey sent out patrols ahead of the two battalions and they were under heavy machine gun and sniper fire; causing fifty to sixty killed or wounded soldiers (Slotkin, 312). As he moved his men to the top of Hill 198, they found the trenches empty and the Germans completely gone (Slotkin, 314). The hill was "unoccupied because of a series of errors and misunderstandings by American and German commanders" (Slotkin, 313). Once at the crest of Hill 198, Major Whittlesey's men started receiving highly accurate fire from the northwest at very long ranges (Slotkin, 314). Hill 198 was to the south of his objective and he used this high ground to get a clear picture of the battlefield.

He could see towards the west and the French were nowhere in sight; and to his east, the 307th was also nowhere to be found. The 307th had stopped short of their objective and were not engaged with the enemy; even though at this time, both they and the French, should have been moving north (Slotkin, 314). The French and 307th not fighting the Germans and pushing

forward, meant that Major Whittlesey's men had no logistical support or security on either flank. The hilltop allowed a good view of the objective assigned to Major Whittlesey and even though he lacked security and support, he could see there was nothing to stop him from taking it (Slotkin, 314).

On the afternoon of October 2, 1918 German units near Charlevaux Mill discovered that American units near Hill 198 had maneuvered further forward than other enemy units. This meant the American's flanks were exposed and possibly vulnerable to a double envelopment attack. This American mistake provided a good opportunity to cut off the Americans and attempt to destroy them before other enemy units could intervene.

Command of these German units belonged to the headquarters of the 76th German Reserve Division. The division's maneuver units were the relatively inexperienced 122nd Landwehr Regiment and the much more experienced 254th Infantry Regiment (Slotkin, 322).

The 122nd Landwehr Regiment was used to scout the Amerikaner nest (the German name for the trapped Americans) from the east and attack from that direction. The battle hardened 254th Infantry Regiment under Major Hunicken, was to attack the western flank from their La Palette position and re-occupy Hill 198 to "prepare and hold the entrenchments on the crest against attacks from two directions" (Slotkin, 323). Major Hunicken was to put his unit between the Amerikaner nest and the American's main body to the south; cutting off the American's supply and communications routes (Slotkin, 322).

Confident that his battalion's road junction objective to the east of Charlevaux Mill could be seized, Major Whittlesey led his troops down the steep backside of Hill 198 and continued north towards their objective. While they moved downhill, the Germans lost sight of them for a short while. Once they reached the base of Hill 198, the German gunners reestablished contact and started hitting them again; causing many casualties (Slotkin, 314). At dusk, Major Whittlesey set into a defensive position in the tree line awaiting movement of the brigade to exploit this success at their objective (Slotkin, 314-315). The success of The Lost Battalion was sent to the rear by runners; their position was accurately plotted and was sent with the message (Johnson and Pratt, 54).

" The German forces along the mainline of the Giselher Stellung knew that Whittlesey's force had taken up a position in the ravine but did not know their exact numbers or what support they had. Seeing no significant reinforcements, elements of the 122nd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Landwehr Division slipped in behind The Pocket in the early hours of the morning, killed and captured several posts along the line and cut off the American Soldiers in the Lost Battalion from any support" (Porter, 1). Major Whittlesey did not know how many men were killed along his communication route; but he knew it was taking too long for message traffic to and from his higher commander Colonel Stacey (Ferrell, 24).

There were not enough rations and the runner chain was working very slowly when the men set into " The Pocket" defense (Johnson and Pratt, 71-72). The casualties were quickly mounting and Major Whittlesey wasn't going to risk weakening his defenses by sending men to the rear to obtain rations or other

needed gear (Johnson and Pratt, 72). He sent a message to the regiment for them to send up the rations, rain gear, and blankets to his unit. This message got to the rear, but the supplies did not reach The Lost Battalion until October 6, 1918 (Johnson and Pratt, 54). The Germans encircled Major Whittlesey's men and attacked from the front, left flank and the rear for a week before they were relieved and pulled off the line (Johnson and Pratt, 54).

One of the worst events that occurred during the ordeal, was artillery fratricide caused by a mistake of a young Lieutenant named Teichmoeller on October 4, 1918 (Johnson and Pratt, 54). He plotted the American's location seven hundred meters to the south of their actual position on a fire support request (Johnson and Pratt, 76-77). The rear unit had accurate coordinates of the battalion's position from Major Whittlesey; but they failed to compare them to the Lieutenant's call for fire message (Johnson and Pratt, 77). This incident was so horrific even twenty years after the war, " four men out of every five who lived through it, were still to recall that horrible period as the worst of the siege, the worst moments they had ever been through anywhere, under any conditions" (Johnson and Pratt, 135).

The Germans used this to their advantage and immediately attacked once the shelling ceased. " As soon as it lifted they came slipping through the woods to assault the right flank" (Slotkin, 334). Major Hunicken was forced to pull back quickly however; the Amerikaner's right flank was not shelled in the American barrage and the American soldiers were responding " energetically" to the Germans (Slotkin, 334). Three days later it was obvious to Major Hunicken that the opportunity to overrun the American position had

never materialized and his German units were being beaten back. The whole Argonne Forest was filling with enemy soldiers and they would have to retreat before the American's reinforcements arrived (Slotkin, 359).

It would take until approximately 1830 on October 7, 1918, for The Lost Battalion to be relieved by the 307th Infantry (Johnson and Pratt, 253). The American and German soldiers who faced off in the Argonne Forest both endured a week of hellish battle that most present day soldiers luckily, will never have to see. The lack of action by French troops on the left flank was one major factor leading to the Germans surrounding of The Lost Battalion. The German forces shelled the American position heavily; but due to the slope of the position, could not get effective results to destroy the enemy position. The Germans had a tactical advantage over the Americans for four days in this battle. They failed to exploit the situation appropriately however and continuously failed to attack with enough force to push the Americans out of their position.

The Americans fought the Germans violently for five days without food, water and a very limited supply of ammunition. If it was not for the strength of those soldiers to overcome impossible conditions, the entire force may have been annihilated in this fighting. When they were relived, they had a 72 percent casualty rate but they were still resisting the Germans to the last probe (Slotkin, 362). Any military force should hope for soldiers of such high caliber and discipline as these men that fought so gallantly in the Argonne Forest during WWI.