

Last of the Doughboys

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"To the world he was just a soldier, but to me, he was all the world." (Epitaph on the gravestone of a soldier killed in WW I)

It must be a very strange and lonely feeling to realize that you are among the very last to still be alive. Being last has always held a somewhat negative connotation in our society: finishing in last place, the last in line, the last to be picked, or the last to know. However, these men are the last of the doughboys, which some might contend is not such a bad thing, for you are still among the living. However, to have endured the deaths of so many of their comrades, both during and after the war, and to have witnessed the devastating wars that followed the "war to end all wars", must have slowly chipped away at their souls. In the prime of their youth they were among the 4.7 million Americans who served their country during World War I. Now, in the twilight of their lives, they are the 4 known surviving American veterans from one of the most devastating wars the world has ever seen.

The origin of the term "doughboys" remains sketchy. Some said it referred to the dough-like shape of their uniform buttons, others thought it was due to the dough-white trimmings on their uniforms. The doughboys fought in one of the greatest conflicts of the 20th century, and its impact upon the world still reverberates to this day. The primary weapons of today's battlefields such as airplanes, tanks, submarines, and machine guns were either used for the first time or perfected for use during World War I. Weapons of mass destruction in the form of poison gas and chemicals were also used for the first time during this conflict. Unfortunately for the soldiers, these innovations resulted in appalling losses. The casualty numbers were staggering: 10 million killed, and 20 million wounded. Nearly 10% of the fighting soldiers in World War I were killed, as opposed to 4.5% in World War II.

When the U.S. entered the war in 1917, they brought with them a naive enthusiasm for combat. Private

Frank Buckles arrived in Europe on the RMS Carpathia, famous for rescuing survivors of the Titanic some 5 years earlier, but was then being used for U.S. troop transport across the Atlantic. “We were the typical cocky Americans no one wants around,” Buckles recalled, “Until they need help winning a war.” During the battle of Belleau Wood, Captain Lloyd Williams was urged to retreat by a French commander, and he replied, “Retreat? Hell, we just got here!” The Americans fought tenaciously, and the famous 77th Division’s “Lost Battalion”, led by Harvard grad Major Charles Whittlesey, exemplified the U.S. fighting spirit by refusing to surrender to superior German forces in the Argonne forest. However, it wasn’t long before the horrors of the war began to take their toll on the doughboys.

Although the U.S. entered the war near its conclusion, and only experienced 8 months of significant combat action, over 116,000 were killed and 200,000 wounded in that short period of time. My father still has disturbing childhood memories of disabled World War I vets, some missing limbs, begging for money on the streets of Philadelphia during the Depression. Tony Pierro, veteran of the Meuse-Argonne offensive, where U.S. fatalities averaged 1,000 per day, recently recalled the bitter memories he carries to this day. “Many of my buddies lost an arm or a leg. I want to forget all of those bad days.” Moses Hardy, the last African American veteran, spent 39 days in combat. He told his son that so many of his buddies were killed that it affected him for many years after the war’s end. John Babcock, an American who served in the Canadian army, recounted a chilling incident he witnessed during the war. A distraught young soldier grabbed everyone’s attention by yelling “Boys....here goes!” He then put a gun to his head, and shot himself.”

Although Charles Whittlesey received the Medal of Honor, he was plagued by nightmares and guilt in the years following the war. On the evening of November 26, 1921, while traveling aboard the SS Toloa bound to Havana from New York, he dined with the ship’s captain and bid him good night at 11:15 pm. Shortly after, Whittlesey committed suicide by jumping overboard.

The entry of the U.S. helped to tip the balance in favor of the Allies, and finally, in 1918, during the 11th month, of the 11th day, at the 11th hour, the guns finally fell silent. The veterans soon referred to it as the “war to end all wars.” How tragically wrong they were.

We have a tendency now to view these surviving veterans as oddities or curiosities. We are amazed by the fact they are still alive, but fail to listen to what they have to say about war. As the last survivors of a war that clearly demonstrated the tragic human consequences that can result from our violent tendencies and technological innovations, these men, and their stories, need to be heard. Perhaps the epitaph is right, and to the world they are just soldiers, only to be seen and not heard. But it doesn’t have to be that way. On this Memorial Day, take a moment to salute the last of the doughboys, for their time on this Earth is nearly up, their words still echo with truth, and their like may never be seen again.

Update – The very last surviving doughboy, Frank Buckles, died in 2011 at the age of 110. He was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery.

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