

October 1918 & The Lost Battalion (51m 55s)

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11 speakers (Theo Mayer, Edward Lengel, Katherine Akey, Rob Laplander, Mike Shuster, Mark Foster, Erik Villard, Speaker 8, Mark Fastoso, John King, Speaker 12)

[0:00:08]

Theo Mayer: Welcome to WW1 Centennial News: The Doughboy Podcast episode number 144. The Doughboy Podcast is about what happened a hundred years ago during and after the war that changed the world. It's not only about then, but it's also about now, how World War I is still present in our daily lives in countless ways. But most important, the podcast is about why and how we'll never let the awareness of World War I fall back in the mists of obscurity. This week, as the show is in between seasons, we are going to reprise segments for an earlier November 2018 episode. As the balance in the war is shifting to the Allied nations, and the American Doughboys are now engaged in dramatic fighting, it's a very pivotal moment a hundred one years ago in the war that changed the world. Please, enjoy a replay taken from episode number 92 that includes our monthly roundtable discussion for this very dynamic October 1918. The Doughboy Podcast is brought to you by the U.S. World War I Centennial Commission and the Doughboy Foundation. I'm Theo Mayer, your producer and host. Welcome to the show. In this week's episode, it's the beginning of October, and we have our October overview roundtable discussion with Katherine Akey, Dr. Edward Lengel, and I. Rob Laplander joins us from France to talk about the Lost Battalion. Mike Shuster updates us on the dizzying October changes a hundred years ago. Mark Foster, a citizen historian, tells us about his experience researching his grandfather's World War I service. Dr. Erik Villard from the Center of Military History introduces us to the Army's incredible World War I website. It's really more than a website, it's a resource. We're going to learn about a new upcoming documentary about the Lost Battalion from the filmmakers who created it. All this week on WW1 Centennial News. How do you even do an overview of October 1918? Well, that was the question on the table. As Dr. Edward Lengel, Katherine Akey, and I got together for our popular monthly overview roundtable of what happened a hundred years ago. What follows is our conversation. Ed, starting with you, what's the overarching theme in October?

[0:02:56]

Edward Lengel: The cracking of the Hindenburg Line, which is the final German line of defense on the Western Front. This is the month that marks the final defeat of the German Army in the field. It's interesting, of course, later on, the Germans are going to deny that their army was ever really defeated. They're going to claim that it's revolutions at home that ended the war. But, in fact, they're heavily defeated on the Western Front this month. This is also the month that marks the collapse of the central powers as a coalition. They began to fall apart both militarily but also diplomatically, and this is the beginning of the end. It's clear, by this point, that the war is going to end in 1918.

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Theo Mayer: Well, the big event that everybody is focused on is the Battle of the Meuse-Argonne. What's the story there?

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Edward Lengel: The Meuse-Argonne Offensive continues to slog forward for the first two weeks of October and reaches a crescendo around October 14th, 15th, 16th as American Forces crack the Central German strongpoint in the Meuse-Argonne, at a place called the heights of Cunel and Romagne. Douglas MacArthur is involved in this action. He claims that he's the guy who found the gap in the German wire that allowed the final German strongpoint to be broken. But, coincidentally, all of the other soldiers who would've witnessed MacArthur finding the gap were killed. So MacArthur said that he led a scouting party toward the wire, and that, during a bombardment, all of his fellow scouts were killed, and only he survived, and that he brought a word back of the gap in the wire. Whether that's true or not, and we don't know, the American Forces are able to break through. But the important thing to remember is the first two weeks of October in the Meuse-Argonne, as well as elsewhere, experienced very heavy fighting, high casualty rates. This is the month in which Charles Whittlesey and George McMurtry of the leaders of the Lost Battalion, the 77th Division, are surrounded and almost wiped up. So there's continues to be very heavy fighting.

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Theo Mayer: Katherine, you mentioned that there are actually actions going on all over the place, and we shouldn't just concentrate on what happened on the Meuse-Argonne.

[0:05:17]

Katherine Akey: Yeah. I mean, of course we want to have a focus on the Americans and what the American Forces were tied up in, but it's important to remember that the Belgians, the French, the British and their Imperial Armies, they're all still fighting on the Western Front. And then they have a lot of successes this month. The Fifth Battle of

Ypres, the Battle of Canal du Nord, St. Quentin Canal, Battle of Cambrai, Battle of Courtrai, lots of battles going on. The real theme of all of these is that the Allies are gaining kilometers, miles and miles with each push, which, for years of this war, was basically unheard of. You did not move very far. They're capturing thousands of German prisoners, sometimes tens of thousands of German prisoners in a matter of days, hundreds of their guns. They're recapturing towns and cities that are strategic, like Ostend, or Douay, or Zeebrugge, some of these towns that are on the coast or have railheads in them. And they're rolling up and punching through the Hindenburg Line, and just sort of getting rid of all the German reinforcements and all the German defenses that have been protected up to this point, just by being at the very back of the fighting.

[0:06:29]

Theo Mayer: Now, the British are also wrapping things up in the Middle East, aren't they?

[0:06:33]

Katherine Akey: Yes, there's a lot of action in the Middle East. Last month, we were talking a lot about the Battle of Megiddo. That technically ends on October 1st when the British Desert Mounted Corps, a cavalry unit, captures Damascus. The battle was a complete loss for the Ottoman Empire, who starts a not-so-strategic retreat, basically getting ass out of Dodge as they can, as fast as they can. And the British chase after them, something known as the Pursuit to Haritan. They chased these retreating Ottoman forces back through Lebanon, all the way to Syria, where eventually they catch up with them. At the end of the month, the conflict ends between the Ottoman Empire and the Allies, and they sign a peace treaty with the Allied forces. Prince Faisal, the leader of the Arab Rebellion, leads his forces into Damascus. That whole saga of the Arab uprising sort of comes to a close.

[0:07:29]

Edward Lengel: French forces are active in the Middle East as well. They captured Beirut in October. British and other forces are advancing through Mesopotamia at the same time. In one interesting episode, one well-known American, namely Kermit Roosevelt, son of Theodore Roosevelt, is active in Mesopotamia at this time driving Rolls-Royce armored cars around what would later become Iraq embedded with British forces.

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Theo Mayer: Ed, there's a big change in the war on the seas. Could you talk about that?

[0:08:03]

Edward Lengel: After all the drama that brought the United States into the war in the first place in the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare early in 1917, the German suspends submarine warfare in October 1918, essentially bringing the war on the seas to a close. The German surface fleet has been hold up in its ports on the North Sea and the Baltic for the past couple of years. The German sailors are rapidly approaching the point of an all-out mutiny. Some of their officers have been proposing the idea that they take the entire German fleet out for one last suicide attack on the British in the North Sea. This quickly becomes clear that the German sailors will never accept that, and their mood is rapidly becoming mutinous. We'll find the results of that next month.

[0:08:59]

Theo Mayer: Speaking of mutinous, there are sort of revolutions building, and, in fact, partly the German government claims that that is what ended the war, right?

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Edward Lengel: Yeah, the blockade of Germany has really taken hold by this point. The German civilians are suffering a great deal. We're seeing revolutionary feelings spreading across Central Europe, which will erupt toward the end of October in Vienna and Budapest, but is rapidly approaching in Germany as well.

[0:09:32]

Theo Mayer: Hey, Katherine, there are some things going on in the war in the sky that sort of point to the future of air warfare.

[0:09:38]

Katherine Akey: The first is, over the course of October, the U.S. Army Signal Corps is starting to experiment with something called the Kettering Bug. It's an unmanned aircraft. Effectively, a drone is sort of the term we would use for it today. It doesn't do so well on its first few test flights, but it does eventually work successfully, but not in time to be used during the war. It's just another little signal of the kinds of aerial warfare we'll see later in the 20th century. Additionally, the first all U.S. Marine Corps air combat action takes place on October 14th when eight Airco aircraft go and bomb a German-held town in Belgium. Additionally, my favorite air story from this month circles around Belgian flying ace Willy Coppens. Willy Coppens is known as the best balloon buster of the war. He liked to target those observation balloons, firing on them, and blowing them up.

[0:10:36]

Theo Mayer: The U.S. Ace in that is a guy name Frank Luke, but this is a Belgian ace?

[0:10:41]

Katherine Akey: This is a Belgian ace. He's actually got a better score than Frank Luke altogether having shot down 34 observation balloons over the course of the war. The Germans know him. He's been bothering them and shooting down their balloons for months at this point, so they decide to lure him into a trap by loading an observation balloon basket with explosives. And then, as he went to shoot down the balloon, it would blow up with a lot of energy and take him down with it. But, instead of that, he actually just flies right through the explosion and emerges unharmed.

[0:11:19]

Theo Mayer: There's a lot of stuff that happens in terms of the reformation of Europe and Eastern Europe, and the formation of countries, and the Balkans that appear and disappear. People aren't necessarily fighting the Germans, or the Americans, or the French. They're all sort of in a giant cauldron. What was that all about?

[0:11:40]

Edward Lengel: It's almost a situation of chaos in Easter Europe. We see the rise of new nations of the independent Czechoslovakia, of Yugoslavia, of Poland and the Polish Army, which is fighting both against the Germans and the Russians, is recognized as a cobelligerent power. But, as Austria-Hungary begins to spin into disarray, the Hungarians are battling with other nationalities in the Balkans, and, especially the Romanians and many others, a number of small republics appear and disappear.

[0:12:18]

Katherine Akey: As the Balkans are convulsing and shifting, there's still fighting going on in Italy, on the Italian front up really high in the part of the Alps known as the Dolomites. This last battle in that front, the Battle of Vittorio Veneto, is a major Italian assault on Austria-Hungarian positions. One year after that, really disastrous Battle of Caporetto where the Italians lost handily. The assault was really intense. They fired over two and a half million shells in the course of a week. That's over 350,000 shells per day, a lot of artillery fire. Ultimately, Austria-Hungary is badly, badly beaten. They actually order a general retreat from all positions in Northern Italy, so their forces are officially pulling completely out of that fighting front at the end of October.

[0:13:11]

Theo Mayer: As we record this, we're 39 days from Armistice, right? Armistice doesn't just happen. This month has to be the sort of countdown process for getting there. Would one or both of you sort of run down what some of the events are that eventually create an Armistice on the 11th of November?

[0:13:30]

Edward Lengel: The German and Austria-Hungarian governments have recognized by the beginning of October that they're going to have to ask for an armistice, and that the war is going to need to end this month. So, on October 4th, they began the process of sending notes to President Woodrow Wilson, who, because of the Fourteen Points, they view him as the friendliest of the Allied leaders. They send notes to him proposing an armistice. Wilson then replies to them demanding that they evacuate the occupied territories. When they accept those terms, he then ramps up the terms and requires a number of other things, including that the Allies will only negotiate with a democratic German government, which of course leads to increased political turmoil in Germany and the other countries.

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Theo Mayer: Out with the Kaiser is what he's saying.

[0:14:28]

Edward Lengel: He's saying out with the Kaiser, but also Hindenburg and Ludendorff, who have been governing more or less as dictators in Germany through 1918. This ends with Ludendorff's resignation on October 27th, so he's gone. Clearly, the Kaiser is going to follow him pretty soon. But the Austria-Hungarians, the Turks, the Bulgarians are not going to wait for the Germans to come to terms with an armistice. The Germans are still fighting as hard as they can, so the Turks actually withdraw from the war at the end of October. The Austria-Hungarians are in the process of withdrawing from the war by that time as well.

[0:15:12]

Theo Mayer: Our first action in the war, and the beginning of the turnaround, was actually Saint-Mihiel. That feels like it was just yesterday. Here we are in a month when it's actually looking like it's wrapping up.

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Edward Lengel: And that creates almost the false impression that the Germans were already defeated when the Americans came in, that they were on the run, that there was no serious fighting going on. But this takes a good four to six weeks from Saint-Mihiel up through the climax of the Meuse-Argonne in mid October, a very hard, very heavy fighting before we reach the point that the Germans finally break. We have other important battles in which Americans are involved, the Blanc Mont in the Champagne region, in which the Marines are involved. The African-American 93rd Division is involved in very heavy fighting in this period. So it's building up in October to a climax, and then a very sudden collapse of the German forces.

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Katherine Akey: I would also mention, it's very easy for us to throw out all these battle names, and talk about how much ground they're covering, or what towns they recapture, but every single one of these battles, these multi-day, multi-week battles, is 30,000 casualties or 12,000 casualties. It's thousands of humans are losing their lives to make this happen, to move this war forward towards an end. The fighting and the dying, the scale of it is not going down. It's just continuing. We're just "making progress".

[0:16:49]

Theo Mayer: I've sort of been trying to wrap my head around the speed of events. It's just sort of staggering.

[0:16:55]

Edward Lengel: Yeah, it's partly fog of war, but it's also a perception on the part of the Allies, and especially the Americans, that they just have to keep pounding, and pounding, and pounding the Germans without lead-up. If anything, they even have to accelerate the rate of attack around now so that the Germans don't get any time to relax, that we really push them into a complete capitulation. That's one reason, in some ways, that the casualty levels practically rise through this period.

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Theo Mayer: As a wrap-up, what would be the two phrases that you would summarize October 1918 with?

[0:17:35]

Edward Lengel: Defeat of the German Army in the field, and the beginning of the Armistice negotiations.

[0:17:44]

Theo Mayer: I have one too. It's almost unfathomable how much is going on. Katherine, what about you?

[0:17:49]

Katherine Akey: I would say it feels like we're at the climax, but we're actually in the falling action of the war. Again, this is informed by our being able to look back with the hindsight of history. It's incredibly busy. Things are changing very fast, but we're not at the climax of this war. We're at that sort of falling action. Not really falling into a proper denouement because the war just comes to a crashing, crashing stop in November, but we're sort of on a very slippery, fast-moving, downward slope towards that finish.

[0:18:30]

Theo Mayer: There are really two fable stories in American World War I lore. Interestingly, they both surround the first few weeks of October. One is the story of Sgt. Alvin York. The other, the story of the Lost Battalion. Both became larger than life, spun up by popular media and the desire to turn the war into adventure and saga. But the real story, the actual events are probably more dramatic, more human, more emotional, and certainly more painful than the fictionalized ones. What they share in common is the humility, valor, willing sacrifice, and character of some remarkable Americans, ordinary men in extraordinary circumstance. We're joined by Rob Laplander, citizen historian and author of Finding the Lost Battalion: Beyond the Rumors, Myths and Legends of America's Famous WW1 Epic. Rob, welcome back to the podcast.

[0:19:27]

Rob Laplander: How are you there, sir?

[0:19:29]

Theo Mayer: Good. Hey, Rob, you're coming in all the way from France.

[0:19:32]

Rob Laplander: Yes, sir. We are just outside of Binarville, France, where the Lost Battalion was trapped for five days on a hillside in the Charlevaux Ravine. We are just about three kilometers away. I'd like to be doing this from in the Pocket, but there's no cell coverage there, sorry.

[0:19:51]

Theo Mayer: Well, I'm not surprised. It's a bit remote. Rob, to start with, who is the Lost Battalion, and how did they wind up getting lost?

[0:20:00]

Rob Laplander: The Lost Battalion is actually a group of about 700 men who were trapped a kilometer and half ahead of enemy lines for five days starting in October 7th, 1918. If this were the '20s or '30s, you'd know all about it. It was a very popular story at the time. About 700 men went into the ravine. At the end of the five-day siege, 194 walked out. They took 72% casualties, and it was one of the most over-reported stories of the war. The most significant thing about it, I think, is that Lost Battalion is a misnomer. They weren't lost in the sense that nobody knew where they were. Everybody knew where they were. Even the guys would tell you, "Hell, everybody knew where we were. Even the Germans knew where we were." The lost meant that they were in a situation that it didn't look like they were going to get out off.

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Theo Mayer: Rob, your book, the Lost Battalion, is actually titled Finding the Lost Battalion: Beyond the Rumors, Myths, Legends of America's Famous WW1 Epic. That begs the question, what are the myths and misconceptions about the epic?

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Rob Laplander: There's always been this misconception that the leader of the Lost Battalion, Charles Whittlesey, had them in the wrong spot, or that he charged ahead in some moment of glory and put them in a situation that was untenable. Neither one of those stories is true. Whittlesey was exactly where he said he was, and he was given specific and direct orders, and he followed them when nobody else did. Another myth is that he sent out the wrong coordinates from where he was, which led to an American artillery barrage directly down on their position. That's not true at all. There were several different factors that were involved in how that happened, but it had absolutely nothing to do with Charles Whittlesey.

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Theo Mayer: But there was a barrage that came down on them?

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Rob Laplander: Yes. On October 4th, for a period of time, there was an American barrage that landed directly on the position. They had to endure for almost two and a half hours.

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Theo Mayer: How did they wind up getting found?

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Rob Laplander: Whittlesey and his men sat on that hillside for five days. In the meantime, the rest of the regiment and their assistant regiment, the 307th, fought very hard to get them out, to get over the hill and into that ravine so that they could link up with their flanks. And it helped pry the line loose so that the Germans had no choice but to actually pull out. It was about 7:30 p.m. On October 7th that the Germans evacuated the area and Company B of the 307th managed to come in on right flank and hook up with Whittlesey. By that time, however, the damage had been done. Only 194 were able to walk out under their own power.

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Theo Mayer: Now, they tried to resupply Whittlesey by air. We had a story about that last week. What was that about?

[0:22:59]

Rob Laplander: The 50th Aero Squadron tried very hard to come in into the ravine and drop packages. The problem was, Whittlesey's men were dug in so deep, if they could be seen from the air, then they could be seen from the hills around them. And if they were seen from the hills around them, they'd be killed.

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Theo Mayer: When they finally came out, there are already cameras and reporters all set up, and they got turned into kind of a media story, didn't they?

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Rob Laplander: Well, even before they were out of the Pocket, as early as October 5th, the first newspaper articles were appearing in the newspapers at home about them. They were already heroes even before they were out of the

Pocket. When they walked out of the position on October 8th, there was cameras there, and reporters, and there's actually film footage that was taken of them coming out.

[0:23:48]

Theo Mayer: Well, Rob, you're there now. What's it like walking the space on the centennial of the event?

[0:23:56]

Rob Laplander: We were here 10 years ago for the 90th, and it was a very moving experience then. Now, being here on the hillside each day that they were there, 100 years to the minute that they were there, this is a story that I've lived with for the better part of 21 or 22 years. My kids know this story. My wife knows this story. You can't swing a dead cat in my house without hitting something Lost Battalion. Here we are at the 100th anniversary on this hillside. It's an extremely moving thing to be part of the Centennial of World War I to begin with. And now, to be allowed to be part of this, to have this honor of standing on this hillside, in the foxholes that they were in a hundred years ago, and to know what happened here, it defies description in a way, and it's very, very moving.

[0:24:51]

Theo Mayer: Rob Laplander is an author, citizen historian, and, importantly, the force behind the Doughboy MIA Project, which cracks all of the still-missing U.S. Service personnel from the war. We have links to both his book and the Doughboy MIA site in the podcast notes. Now, as we discussed in the roundtable, the wheels of change are spinning at a dizzying rate, but not for the men with their boots on the ground. Fighting is fierce, losses are horrific as the national leaderships begin to face the reality that the war must end. Wilson's insistence that he will not negotiate terms with the Kaiser or his military regime has a profound effect. Here, with a great overview of these tectonic shifts in geopolitical terms, is Mike Shuster, former NPR correspondent and curator for The Great War Project blog. Mike, how would you characterize this moment in the war?

[0:25:48]

Mike Shuster: Theo, I think we might say faithful would be a good word. The headline reads, "Generals To The Kaiser: The War Cannot Go On. Talk of an Armistice, Bulgaria in Turmoil, But Fighting Still Ferocious." Special to The Great War Project. A century ago, one by one and day by day, Germany and its allies are crumbling. "On September 27th, more than 23,000 German prisoners had been taken," reports historian Martin Gilbert. Elsewhere, on the front line of the Western Front, a six-hour artillery bombardment with more than 700 Allied tanks in action. By then, more than a thousand aircraft have joined the fight, supporting the Allied effort with more than 700 tons of bombs dropped. "By nightfall," writes Gilbert, "the attacking forces had taken 10,000 prisoners and 200 guns." Even by the standards of the Western Front, the scale of the German losses is astounding: 33,000 prisoners in one day. The British launch another massive offensive on September 28th at Ypres, the third attack to break the German hold there, 500 aircraft are in the sky. Belgian troops are also in action that day, recapturing Passchendaele, which had been lost a year earlier. "The scene of such terrible slaughter," writes historian Gilbert. On the Salonica Front in mountainous Greece, more than 10,000 Bulgarian and German soldiers are taken prisoner in the third week of September. Then, a significant move to end the fighting. "On September 28th," writes Gilbert, "Bulgaria, with British and Greek troops already on her soil, began armistice talks with the French and British in Salonica." They are the first to succeed in calling off the fight. Top German political leaders then weigh in. They tell the German Kaiser that Germany must join the armistice talks. They tell the Kaiser, on September 29th, that the war cannot go on. Why? According to historian Martin Gilbert, Germany's top two military leaders tell the Kaiser this is not about the will and ability of the German soldier to fight. No, it is also President Wilson's deep reluctance to negotiate in any way with the Kaiser himself or his military chiefs. "So," Gilbert reports, "the Kaiser signs a proclamation establishing a parliamentary regime." In the space of a single day, Germany's militarism and autocracy were all but over. But the battles continued, nowhere more fiercely than on the Meuse-Argonne Front. On September 29th, the fourth day of the battle, American Forces were brought to a halt, partly by the unflagging German defense, partly by the incredible chaos that had developed in their lines of supply and communication. Observes one visitor to Commanding General Pershing at the French Front, "His soldiers were dying bravely, but they were not advancing, or very little, and their losses were very heavy." All that great body of men, which the American Army represented, was literally struck with paralysis. "Then hostilities on the Bulgarian front," reports Gilbert, "ended at noon on September 30th." That leaves Bulgaria in turmoil and with no chance of Germany providing reinforcements. The Bulgarian collapse was a blow to Germany and Austria, both of which were suddenly cut off from all land links with their ally Turkey. At the beginning of October, a century ago, the situation looks dire for Germany, but fighting is ferocious nevertheless. That's news from The Great War Project, this week, a century ago.

[0:29:19]

Theo Mayer: Mike Shuster is the curator for The Great War Project blog. The link to his post is in the podcast notes. That's it for a hundred years ago. Let's jump back into the present with WW1 Centennial News Now. This week, in our segment on remembering veterans, we're joined by the grandson of a World War I veteran whose story of uncovering his family's heritage is pretty inspirational. Mark Foster knew next to nothing about his grandfather, John

Foster, except that he was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. But as he started to go through his family's heirlooms, letters, photographs, and newspaper articles, he began a journey of discovery about his grandfather. Mark, thank you for joining us on the podcast.

[0:30:13]

Mark Foster: Good morning, Theo. Thank you for having me.

[0:30:17]

Theo Mayer: Mark, this voyage of discovery, what launched it and how did you begin to uncover your grandfather's story of service in World War I?

[0:30:24]

Mark Foster: I had found a box of my father's memories, and going through it... Actually, it was headed to the garbage. I was cleaning up the basement. "Yeah, I better take a look at these things." Next thing you know, I start going through, I find letters from my grandfather from the front. I found the letter from his commanding officer to our family that he had passed. And then, of course, the one that started all this trouble is an article that I found from 1936 regarding a changing of the headstone. At that point, I was starting my family tree, and we had no pictures of my grandfather. I figured a picture of the headstone would be a nice addition to the family tree, so I requested one. The article from changing the headstone, it was mismarked at Arlington where he was from Kansas. At that point, I ordered that picture, and, sure as heck, it was still Kansas. Now, that got me kind of fired up. I wrote every state legislator. I wrote the local paper. Two people responded, Congressman Jesse Jackson and The Journal-Register in Springfield, reporter [Dave Bakke] interested in the story. Next thing you know, the ball is rolling. I get a phone call from Arlington National Cemetery that, "Yeah, all we need is a letter from the family requesting a change in the headstone." Which I did. At that point, I had advised Dave Bakke. He says, "Mark, this sounds interesting. I think I'm going to do an article." It ended up on the front page of The Journal-Register, "Headstone to Change 93 Years Later." I was familiar with the First Division Museum in Wheaton, Illinois. I had thought maybe they might be interested in this because John was a member of the 1st Division, sent this off to them, and, two weeks later, I get a letter that John Chester may be eligible for the Silver Star. Once again, I started writing letters. Next thing you know, I get a very impressive letter from the Awards and Decorations Branch in Fort Knox that, yes, in fact, he was eligible for the Silver Star. That's pretty much my story there.

[0:32:58]

Theo Mayer: That's quite a story. You published your findings on the Commission Story of Service catalog, which is going to preserve that story and your grandfather's service for posterity. How did you find the Stories of Service? What was it like submitting it?

[0:33:14]

Mark Foster: Well, my wife goes nuts with me. I will spend pretty much an hour every single day looking into the World War I. You hit Google, hit anything that is related to my grandfather. Well, one day, the Commission website came up. The more I delve into it, I found the story. "You know, they might be interested in this story." But as lengthy as it was, I was concerned it would be chopped to shreds, and it was not. They accepted it fully and, in fact, sent copies of the link to all my relatives nationwide. They are just thrilled that it is now saved for posterity.

[0:34:00]

Theo Mayer: Many people know that their ancestors served but don't know the story. What advice would you give to others who want to uncover their own family's heritage the way you did?

[0:34:10]

Mark Foster: Oh gosh, again, patience.

[0:34:13]

Theo Mayer: Maybe with a little dedication to boot.

[0:34:16]

Mark Foster: Exactly. Sit there, and you find a link, follow the link. I've just really started with the Commission website. I know, generally, where my grandfather was killed. I've been trying to Google Earth it. The idea that I can punch in a website, and here the Google Earth will show up is thrilling to me. It's become a mission for me.

[0:34:42]

Theo Mayer: Well, it's really a delight to talk to you, and congratulations on having done this.

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Mark Foster: Well, thank you. I sure do appreciate the opportunity to speak about my efforts.

[0:34:54]

Theo Mayer: Mark Foster is the grandson of World War I veteran John Foster. Learn more about his grandfather at the links in the podcast notes. I'm excited about our next guest because of the organization that he represents. For our Remembering Veteran segment, we're joined by the Digital Historian for the U.S. Army Center for Military History, Dr. Erik Villard. Dr. Villard's been on point for the Army's World War I commemoration website. Erik, welcome to the podcast.

[0:35:24]

Erik Villard: Thank you for having me.

[0:35:26]

Theo Mayer: Erik, the U.S. Army Center for Military History, the CMH, has had its own history tracing back to the Civil War. Your primary responsibility is to be a historical resource to the Army itself, right?

[0:35:38]

Erik Villard: Right, that is our principal mission. We provide the historic confirmation that the Army staff and the various Army organizations would need for their institutional education and memory. We also have a secondary but important role in providing this information to the public and to the veteran community as well. We are able to accomplish both missions, I think, quite seamlessly because when we do this work for the Army, and making sure we are the agency that gets the information correct for the Army decision-making process, it's also that high standards of scholarship is something that we can share with the public.

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Theo Mayer: Erik, what's the idea for the public-facing site?

[0:36:22]

Erik Villard: Well, we have a multi-pronged commemoration effort for the First World War. The website is a World War I subsite that is divided into 30 chapters. Each chapter comes out on a monthly basis, and so the first part of the website traces the evolution of the Army in the period before 1917. And then, the meat of the website talks about the experience of the AEF in World War I, and then the concluding chapters talk about what happens after the Armistice.

[0:36:54]

Theo Mayer: It's really comprehensive. You really worked hard at that. You did a great job. What's the visitor experience like when you get there?

[0:37:02]

Erik Villard: Well, I designed the interface like a multi-function display. It's a type of device. It's used in a lot of military vehicles where you basically have a central screen, and then you have option buttons on the side and bottom. So depending on where you want to go, where you want to look at, those option buttons may change. All the material is grouped together on paper-sized documents. The advantage of that is, when you download it, all the photos, and text and anything else stays together. So it's a very easy way to view and share the material. I think there's something for everyone. It's designed to be downloaded, so it's great for educators. You can just download entire lessons as JPEGs, PowerPoint, or PDF, just is a whole range of material, again, that really is optimized for educators.

[0:37:55]

Theo Mayer: Well, Erik, what happened from 1917 to 1919 to the organization called the U.S. Army? There's no precedent in history for that kind of expansion and growth. Can you talk about that just for a moment?

[0:38:10]

Erik Villard: I think it's fair to say that the modern United States Army was born in the First World War. The Army that we have with us today owes much of its organization to the First World War. It was also a period of great technological change. For example, you have aerial photography, which really revolutionized the fighting in World War I because you now had the ability to send a plane above, take very detailed photographs of the enemy trenches and artillery emplacements, and then provide that information to your commanders. It really gave commanders a kind of situation awareness that we take for granted now with all our satellite imagery and cell phones. So I'm releasing these files so that you can get a sense of the scale and complexity of these battles in Google Earth, on your own computer.

[0:39:05]

Theo Mayer: Erik, one last question, this is for you personally. For every one who's sort of fallen into this and dug into it, it's a voyage of discovery. What's the most memorable thing you learned from pulling all this together?

[0:39:17]

Erik Villard: It's been a remarkable opportunity for me because, my background, I'm a Vietnam War historian. Now, I'd done some work with the First World War. I actually wrote my dissertation on Camp Lewis, which was a training camp in Washington State, but I hadn't done a lot with World War I. So it gave me a chance to really dive deep. I think the thing that impressed me the most is the photographic record. You realize that if you look at these photos, at these individuals, they don't seem like they're distant history. They seem like they could be us. I think that's the most striking thing. Even though a century seems like a long time, when you look at this stuff, you realize, no, it's still very much with us.

[0:40:01]

Theo Mayer: Dr. Erik Villard is the Digital Historian at the U.S. Army Center for Military History. Learn more about the center and see their really compelling website by visiting the links in the podcast notes. Now, during our history segment, we dug into the story of the Lost Battalion. For our Spotlight on the Media, we're going to take a deeper dive into the story, starting with our regular podcast contributor, Dr. Edward Lengel. His new book is called *Never in Finer Company: The Men of the Great War's Lost Battalion*. Recently, Ed and film historian Anjali Singh appeared on C-SPAN Reel America. Here's a clip.

[0:40:41]

Speaker 8: Up next, we will show you in its entirety a silent film from 1919. But first, to explain this film, Edward Lengel, who's the author of the new book *Never in Finer Company*. We thank you for joining us on American History TV, and Anjali Singh, who is a historian of silent films. Let me begin with your interest in the Lost Battalion. Where does it come from and why?

[0:41:01]

Edward Lengel: It's the most powerfully human story of the entire First World War, and the most powerfully human story I've read in American military history. It's very intimate. It's about a small group of individuals who came from very different backgrounds, many of them from deep poverty, many of them were immigrants, some of them had not even been naturalized, others were farmers and ranchers from the West, who came together and endured a common struggle. They bonded together, and they became part of the American story. I've walked on the side of the battlefield itself, which you can still do today. You can see the rifle pits, the trenches that the soldiers dug there in the woods. You can get an intense sense of what they experienced.

[0:41:52]

Theo Mayer: Ed is also one of the key interviews in a new documentary about the Lost Battalion.

[0:42:01]

Edward Lengel: Charles Whittlesey remains an enigma. I don't think he really wanted anybody to know him deep down. He was a very complicated individual. He's haunted by a sense of responsibility for every single man who died in that Pocket. Ultimately, he carries the burden of every death on himself, and they begin to appear in his dreams. In one dream, he is carried back to a moment in the Pocket where, for one brief moment, he fell asleep. One brief moment, only to wake up cheek to cheek with a dead man. That comes back to him in his dreams, and he can't sleep.

[0:42:53]

Theo Mayer: That clip is from the new documentary titled *The Lost Battalion* produced by Mark Fastoso, John King, and Luis Blandon. Now, best of all, Mark and John are with us here today to talk about it. Gentlemen, the Lost Battalion is one of the better-known sagas in the First World War. What inspired you guys to tell the story as a documentary?

[0:43:13]

Mark Fastoso: I was talking to Ed Lengel about his book. We were musing about what this would be as a documentary if we were going to do that. He said the magic words to me, "There's film footage of the Lost Battalion from the Meuse-Argonne offensive." As a filmmaker, you kind of always want to hear that. Sure enough, there were cameras that filmed them marching out of the woods after they were relieved. I thought, "Wow, all this footage we have of the Meuse-Argonne offensive, how many can we tie to an actual unit?" We found out Damon Runyon, the great sports reporter, was right there, live. He interviewed, and he wrote about that. That footage and that story, that inspired me to say, "Hey, there's something here to document. You could look at these men in the eye." I thought about that footage of them coming out. Immediately, I said, "Why did they film it? It's not combat. It's just guys marching." All those together, I started to think, this is a really layered story. Immediately, I just said, "I think we

should do this." Because this footage allows people to start to connect and relate. It's the real thing. It's the real people. I thought it was just super compelling.

[0:44:27]

Theo Mayer: For your documentary, you went out, and you interviewed a real who's who, a lineup of experts, including Ed Lengel. What was the thing that each of you learned that really sticks out for you after going through all that? Let me start with you, Mark.

[0:44:41]

Mark Fastoso: Well, what I learned is, why do we even know about the Lost Battalion? How many battalions fought the Meuse-Argonne offensive? This is the only one people kind of know about. That became really what I was interested in finding out. What I discovered is that Charles Whittlesey and the Lost Battalion, their story is totally intertwined with the story of Damon Runyon and the newspapers. Damon Runyon was tasked to go to the Meuse-Argonne and send back stories of New Yorkers to make the people at home feel good. He met Charles Whittlesey for probably 15 minutes, and that's why we know about the Last Battalion. So it's really a story about how America wants heroes, how they create heroes, what the media does, and what that does to the men who have to take on the mantle of being heroes.

[0:45:28]

Theo Mayer: John, as you got into this, what was the thing that struck you the most?

[0:45:32]

John King: One of the things that really stayed with me is this issue of interaction of storytelling and real history or history in the media. Because, of course, now we see in our country, the media is sometimes part of the story, and the media is helping create the story at the same time. It's really fascinating that this is a story where that same dynamic was happening. That something was happening, reality was happening, the battle was happening, the media, through Damon Runyon and others, ended up telling the story but also constructing history. Some of your listeners, I'm sure, know about the "Go to Hell" Whittlesey comment. And the idea that some of these famous phrases, or famous phrases in the American history, is really partly a social construction or a media and social construction. That was really powerful and is powerful to me, and that's one of the storylines of our film.

[0:46:15]

Theo Mayer: I really like the angle that you're going for. It actually leads directly into conversations that Katherine Akey and I have had. Katherine's my cohort and the show's line producer. She's got a real soft spot for Whittlesey because we've talked about him before, and it seems that he suffered with PTSD, and, in the end, he committed suicide. Do you actually get into that in the film?

[0:46:36]

Mark Fastoso: Yeah, we do. I mean, that's really what the storyline drives to. I have a soft spot for Whittlesey. I'm not sure how you couldn't. The hope is that when viewers watch, they start to feel a little bit of the pressure he's under. It won't stop. By the end, before he commits suicide, people are going to sense that's what's going to happen, and they're going to feel a little heartbroken about that.

[0:46:58]

John King: We definitely deal with what happens with Whittlesey and Damon Runyon after the war, but we really go into the battle and what they experienced because there is what happens after, but there is the actual trauma. When you mention PTSD, you can't read up, or listen to, or watch anything about the Lost Battalion without realizing every single person there, including Whittlesey, must have experienced some kind of posttraumatic stress or some kind of traumatic stress. You get this double combination of some of the most intense trauma a human can experience combined with what happens after war, which is kind of immediate trauma or a social trauma that happens to him and continues to happen. One really interesting thing that viewers or listeners might not be aware of is how Damon Runyon's life is completely different after the war. It's really fascinating that you have this trajectory of Whittlesey's life going in one direction, and Damon Runyon, who is just reporting on it, going a completely different direction.

[0:47:47]

Theo Mayer: Where and how can we see the documentary?

[0:47:51]

Mark Fastoso: Website, EchoFilmsProductions.com, and there will be information there. You should be able to, for a small fee, rent it from there. It's an hour-long show. That's where you can see it now.

[0:48:03]

Theo Mayer: Perfect, gentlemen. Well, I really, really look forward to seeing it. Thank you so much for coming on.

[0:48:09]

Mark Fastoso: Thank you, Theo. [crosstalk].

[0:48:10]

John King: Thank you for having us.

[0:48:11]

Theo Mayer: Mark Fastoso, John King, and Luis Blandon are the producers behind the new documentary about the Lost Battalion. Learn more at the links in the podcast notes. With that, we wrap up episode number 144, a reprise of an October 2018 production from the award-winning WW1 Centennial News: The Doughboy Podcast. We want to thank all our contributors, talented crew, and supporters who made today's episode possible, including: Dr. Edward Lengel, military historian and author; Rob Laplander, author, citizen historian, and the driving force behind the Doughboy MIA Project; Mike Shuster, curator for The Great War Project blog; Mark Foster, grandson of World War I veteran John Foster; Dr. Erik Villard, Digital Historian for the Center for Military History; Mark Fastoso and John King, two of the producers of the new documentary titled The Lost Battalion; Katherine Akey, World War I photography specialist and line producer for the podcast. Many thanks to Mac Nelsen and Tim Crowe, our interview editing team; J.L. Michaud for his research, Rachel Hurt, who is our fall intern. I'm Theo Mayer, your producer and host. The U.S. World War I Centennial Commission was authorized by Congress in early 2013 to honor, commemorate, and educate the nation about World War I on the occasion of the centennial of the war. For over a half a decade, the Commission, commissioner staff, and our many associates and supporters have labored to inspire a national conversation and awareness about World War I. We brought the lessons of a hundred years ago to today's educators, their classrooms, and to the public. We've helped restore World War I memorials in communities of all sizes across our nation. Now, as the Commission's charter to honor, educate, and commemorate the Centennial of World War I has been successfully accomplished, the full focus of the Commission is turning to its capstone mission to build the National World War I Memorial in Washington, D.C. We want to thank the Commission's founding sponsor, the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, as well as the major contribution of the Starr Foundation. Thanks to the podcast's sponsors, the U.S. World War I Centennial Commission, and the Doughboy Foundation. The podcast and a full transcript of the show can be found on our website at WW1CC.org/cn. You'll find WW1 Centennial News: The Doughboy Podcast in all the places that you get your podcasts, including on iTunes, Google Play, TuneIn, Spotify, Radio On Demand, even on YouTube, asking Siri, or using your smart speaker by saying, "Play WW1 Centennial News Podcast." The Commission's Twitter and Instagram handles are both @ww1cc, and we're on Facebook at WW1 Centennial. This has been a reprise of episode number 92 from November 2018.

[0:51:28]

Speaker 12: (singing)

[0:51:57]

Theo Mayer: Thank you for listening. So long.

[0:51:59]