

A Newly Discovered Diary of the LOST BATTALION



Omer Richards tells today how he was sent by Major Whittlesey to get one of Theodore Tollefson's pigeons. Crawling through a barrage of shellfire, Richards found Tollefson dead, his pigeons gone from a shattered coop.

By Thomas M. Johnson

OF the many hard blows that struck the heroic Lost Battalion, the cruellest came on Oct. 4, 1918, little more than 24 hours after the American troops discovered they were surrounded and outnumbered by Germans in the Argonne Forest.

They had adopted Major Whittlesey's and Captain McMurtry's slogan: "No falling back!" Now, suddenly as tragic drama, the way back was blocked, and by a hand that dealt them a stab in the back. From the rear, friendly artillery fired into them with fierce intensity, killing and wounding 30 Americans.

Hitherto untold features of this agonizing, maddening occurrence appear in the diary that Private Jim Larney of Watertown, N. Y., a Lost Battalion survivor, kept through the siege. It records the experiences of Larney and others who endured the 125-hour gantlet of fire, hunger and thirst in "the Pocket" in Charlevaux Valley. There the Lost Battalion had thrust itself by obeying Maj. Gen. Robert Alexander's orders. Those orders were to hold on in "the Pocket."

Relief could come only from the rear—but all that did come from there was death, in the flame and smoke of bursting shells from "friendly" cannon. They brought two wounds to Jim Larney, but the slight, sensitive, religious youth who was Whittlesey's signalman described the experience modestly.

"Fri., Oct. 4," he wrote. "Continued misery. Barrage upon us in P. M. Sgt. Major Gaedeke missing. I received high explosive wound in right arm and machine gun left leg. Tollefson, pigeon man with Richards, wounded already has disappeared, too. Cavanaugh (William M. Cavanaugh of Rochester, Minn.), 2nd Platoon Hq. Co., 308 (308th Infantry), with C Co., wounded. Tree fell on him also. Great many casualties. Major W. (Whittlesey) bleeding from cut on nose. Perhaps not from shelling. I asked him if he were hurt. He did not reply.

"Major Whittlesey sent following message by last remaining pigeon, during barrage:

"C. O. (Commanding Officer) 1st Bn. 308 Inf.

To C. O. 308 Inf.

"We are along the road, parallel 276.4. Our own artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us.

"For Heaven's Sake! Stop it.

"Whittlesey,
'Major 308th.'

"Jos. Friel and Geo. Botelle went out with message. Friel killed.

"Later Note—Gaedeke nor Tollefson (Tollefson) never found."

(Benjamin F. Gaedeke of New York, cited for extraordinary heroism and inspiration; Theodore Tollefson, of Hayfield, Minn., and Joseph Friel, New York City, were killed. George Botelle, Lakeside, Conn., was wounded. Also wounded, although he could still write down what he saw of historic events, was Larney.)

"WE landed in 'the Pocket' with two coops, four pigeons in each," Omer Richards, the quiet little French-American, who was Whittlesey's pigeon man, says today. "Tollefson and I took one each, so a single shell burst couldn't kill all the pigeons. When the



Omer Richards as he looks today.

barrage hit us, I had two birds left. They weren't fastened to their perches, but free in the cubicles. I fumbled to open the basket—the strain and excitement were awful, with those shells bursting all about—and all of a sudden, one of the birds came popping out. I lunged to stop him, but he dodged, and I swear he flew up and away—and never a message on him! Only one pigeon left! I just had to make him good! So, though my nerves jumped and my head buzzed with the noise and shock of shell bursts, when Major Whittlesey handed me the message I attached it to the pigeon's neck, and released it.

"What a relief! Now the message would get back to our artillery and stop this terrible shelling! So I thought—but what do you suppose that pigeon did? Instead of flying away, like the first one that had no message, it stuck with us! It flew into a tree, and roosted there! Whittlesey was wild!

"Can't you shoo it away?" he shouted above the noise.

"Well, I did—but then the bird just flew around in circles over our heads! It must have been shell-shocked. We were scared stiff it would be shot down, for the Germans were shooting at it. They knew what it was for, all right! We found out afterward that they or one of our own shells must have hit it: it lost a leg, and was decorated. That was the famous *Cher Ami*—dear friend. A dear friend to us that day, all right—and lucky, too. For it was our very last pigeon.

"Whittlesey sent me afterward for one of Tollefson's birds," Omer Richards continues. "Guess he wanted to send a second message. Through the barrage I crawled to Tollefson's funkhole. There lay Tollefson, dead. There was his pigeon coop—torn apart by a shell—one of those friendly shells. There were no pigeons left!"

Larney remembers that day, too: "The shells were hammering down around me and when I saw Bob Manson crouching at the top of the slope on the edge of the road, I joined him. We saw a man lying face down in the ditch across the road. We dashed over and threw ourselves down, one behind the other. I was behind the man, Bob behind me. We thought we were okay.

not German shells, but friendly shells
Col. Whittlesey sent following message by last remaining pigeon, during barrage
C. O. 1st Bn. 308 Inf.
To C. O. 308 Inf.
We are along the road, parallel 276.4. Our own artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us.
For Heaven's Sake! Stop it.
Whittlesey
Major 308th
Jos. Friel and Geo. Botelle went out with message. Friel killed.
Later note - Gaedeke nor Tollefson never found

This part of Larney's diary carries the message that saved the Lost Battalion from the fire of its own artillery. Whittlesey's message ends with the urgent plea: "For Heaven's Sake! Stop It."

But no—we'd escaped the 'friendly' shells, but there was an enterprising German machine gunner up that road, and how he did sow them in there! To this day I can't see how we escaped! Low-growing leaves and twigs right beside my head were being snicked off. Either Bob or I hollered: 'We've got to get out of here! Let's go!'

"Bob dashed back across the road and into the trees down the slope . . . and in crossing, lost a finger of one hand. Bob went out in the ambulance with me when we were relieved."

YET, amazingly, the smoke-cloud of that barrage was silver-lined. For the pigeon that at last started forth from it, also reached its objective. *Cher Ami* delivered the message to headquarters. By that time the barrage had stopped, but the message probably prevented another similar ghastly shelling.

The night of Oct. 4, the dull report of the American automatic rifles came from the ridge to the south. Help was on its way! Hopefully, scouts were sent out to guide the relieving troops. The scouts never came back. The cheering "thump-thump-thump!" died away. The Germans had thrown back the would-be rescuers, as thereafter they threw them back time after time. With heroic persistence, the rest of the 308th and 307th tried to pierce the iron-gray ring. More Americans died in the effort to rescue the Lost Battalion, than died in the Battalion itself.

Oct. 6 dragged wearily; machine gun and sniper fire, another heavy grenade attack; and more blasting from minenwerfer. One bomb struck beside Jim Larney's funkhole, half covered him with dirt, filled his eyes and ears.

Once he had to move his position, and he wrote, "I had great difficulty in scrambling out, on account of being stiff and lame from the wounds. Lieutenant Peabody killed, probably by a sniper. Tumbled down into our funkhole and out again, and down into one below us."

That gruesome event ended suffering for Lieut. Marshall G. Peabody, of New York City, a member of the 306th Machine Gun Battalion. Wounded two days earlier, he had been in constant pain. Larney says he "sat up there above us with his greatcoat draped over his shoulders. We could hear him moaning in the night. Some stray shot or sniper's bullet must have got him, for the first thing we knew he fell right in on top of us and out again, and came to rest in a sort of shellhole below us. Must have been alive as he fell, and dead shortly after he stopped."

He lay unburied, like all who died that day. Hunger and exhaustion made the survivors too weak to bury their dead. So, dead and living lay together.

Yet they clung to their slogan: "No falling back!"

NEXT WEEK: The German demand to surrender, and Whittlesey's refusal. . . . Rescue comes at last.