



## *Never in Finer Company: The Men of the Great War's Lost Battalion*

by Edward G. Lengel.

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*Never in Finer Company* by prolific military historian Edward Lengel<sup>1</sup> explores the familiar story of the heroism of the nine companies of the 77th Division who, surrounded by German forces in the Charlevaux Ravine (“the pocket”), survived a week-long ordeal of combat, starvation, sleeplessness, and loss of life, before being relieved by other units of the Allied Expeditionary Force (AEF). Contemporary accounts of the bravery of the so-called “Lost Battalion” captivated a nation hungry for some good news from the western front.

Lengel focuses on the experiences, before, during, and after the war, of four men: Charles Whittelsey, George McMurtry, Alvin York, and Damon Runyan. Whittelsey grew up in Massachusetts, studied at the Harvard School of Law, and was practicing law before he entered military service. McMurtry, a successful New York stock broker before the war, proved to be an extraordinary leader who, along with Whittelsey, commanded the troops of the Lost Battalion during its nightmare in the pocket. Afterward, Whittelsey told McMurtry “George, we will never be in finer company than we are right now” (249), giving Lengel a title for his book.

Alvin York belonged to a unit that relieved the Lost Battalion. An expert sharpshooter from the hills of Tennessee, he ruthlessly killed the Germans trying overrun the battalion. His exploits became legendary after the war, when the American entertainment industry capitalized on his life story: York (with editor Thomas Skeyhill) wrote an autobiography in 1928<sup>2</sup> and Gary Cooper starred in the full-length Hollywood film based on it in 1941.<sup>3</sup>

The last of Lengel’s target figures is Damon Runyan, an intrepid war correspondent who publicized his beloved AEF doughboys in his popular reports for the *New York American* newspaper.

York, Whittelsey, McMurtry, and Runyan ... had [each] trod a unique path to the October day that engulfed them in the same stricken forest in eastern France known as the Argonne. They all fought in the same bitter contest and were all transformed. But their stories did not end there. Afterward they would live, speak to the public, and sometimes meet in places like New York, Washington, D.C., and tiny Pall Mall, Tennessee, experiencing the long journey home, but without any hope of healing privacy. Each man was haunted in his own way. None, however, ceased to struggle for meaning or to turn his personal demon into a servant of good. (5)

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1. His previous work includes *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918: The Epic Battle That Ended the First World War* (NY: Henry Holt, 2008) and *Thunder and Flames: Americans in the Crucible of Combat, 1917–1918* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2015), among many other books.

2. *Sergeant York: His Own Life Story and Diary* (rpt. NY: Racehorse Publ, 2018).

3. *Sergeant York*, dir. Howard Hawks.

Over the years historians have written solid books about the Lost Battalion.<sup>4</sup> Do we need yet another one on the subject? The answer is “yes”: Edward Lengel has made a major contribution to the literature by going beyond (while not ignoring) the purely military aspects of the story to provide a valuable work of social history, with due attention to the immigrant roots of many of the soldiers of the 77th Division, as well as to their prewar lives and occupations. We read, for instance, of “Private Irving Sirota, a Russian Jewish jeweler from Brooklyn who had been naturalized just before the division left New York,” “Lieutenant Erwin Bleckley, a bank teller from Wichita, Kansas,” and “Lieutenant Harold Goettler, a former a University of Chicago student athlete turned stock broker” (209, 215).

Lengel also discusses in some detail various aspects of city life in large and small urban areas during the war. He concentrates, of course, on New York City throughout the war years, beginning with the massive German sabotage-generated “Black Tom” explosion along the warehouses of the New York waterfront (30 July 1916). He explores, too, the importance of Washington, DC, in the postwar years. Nor does he neglect the small towns across the country that supplied the AEF’s manpower, portraying the qualities and backgrounds of citizen soldiers who served in a diverse national fighting organization.

The Lost Battalion presented a microcosm of this (all-American) phenomenon. By their bravery, resolution under adversity, and young spirit, they had had shown how Jews, Christians, unbelievers, country boys, city boys, Anglo-Saxons, southern and eastern Europeans, Asians, native Americans, rich and poor could work together under one flag and become one. Nobody needed to tell them what had happened—they knew and believed it. But the American media, by zeroing in on what had happened in the Charlevaux Ravine and telling the story to the world, ensured that the public would recognize and appreciate the example. (278)

This meticulously researched and imaginatively written volume draws on pertinent sources, unpublished and published, including divisional histories, reports in daily newspapers throughout the United States, relevant memoirs, and scholarly monographs on the First World War. Edward Lengel never loses sight of the human interest element of the Lost Battalion. His engrossing book is essential reading for students of military, social, and urban history, as well as anyone with an interest in American life in the twentieth century.

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4. E.g., Thomas Johnson and Fletcher Pratt, *The Lost Battalion* (1938; rpt. Lincoln, NB: Bison Books, 2000); Alan D. Gaff, *Blood in the Argonne: The “Lost Battalion” of World War I* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2004); Robert Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion: Beyond the Rumors, Myths and Legends of America’s Famous WWI Epic* (2006; 3rd ed. Waterford, WI: Lulu Pr, 2017); and Robert H. Ferrell, *America’s Deadliest Battle: Meuse-Argonne, 1918* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2007) esp. 76–79.