The First Battle of the Marne

Look back at the bloody fight that saved Paris and changed the course of World War I.

CHRISTOPHER KLEIN • UPDATED: AUG 31, 2018 · ORIGINAL: SEP 5, 2014

Paris crackled with panic as September 1914 arrived. Just a month into the Great War, the Germans had the French capital within sight. Sporadic air raids hit the city at night, resulting in damage more psychological than physical, but on September 2 a German biplane carpet-bombed the city with propaganda leaflets that read, "There is nothing you can do but surrender." As crowds called for their leaders to declare Paris an "open city" in order to spare it from enemy attack, tens of thousands of Parisians thronged rail stations to flee the city. The French government had already bolted earlier that day for Bordeaux, taking the gold from the central bank with it. Workers at the Louvre feverishly shuttled masterworks to Toulouse. The military governor of Paris, General Joseph-Simon Gallieni, predicted the Germans would arrive in the City of Lights by September 5 if no actions were taken.

From the day Germany declared war on France on August 3, the fight had been one-sided. German forces had advanced like lightning through neutral Belgium and the French countryside, and by September 2, German cavalrymen had crossed the Marne River and been spotted on the outskirts of Meaux, only 25 miles northeast of the French capital. It appeared that Germany's "Schlieffen Plan," which called for overwhelming the disorganized French army in six weeks before transferring forces to an eastern front against Russia, was working to perfection.

With its army in retreat, the French needed a miracle to save Paris from enemy occupation. They received it on September 3 when French reconnaissance pilots spotted the forces of German General Alexander von Kluck's First Army, which had been pointed at Paris like a spear tip, suddenly switch to the southeast. Although under orders to support the Second Army to guard against possible attacks from Paris, the aggressive von Kluck instead sought glory and a chance to drive a stake in the enemy by pursuing the retreating French Fifth Army across the Marne River east of Paris. By doing so, his troops, exhausted after weeks of marching and fighting, outran their supply lines, and he inadvertently exposed his right flank to French forces.

The French seized the opportunity, and on September 5 French Commander-in-Chief Joseph Joffre ordered a counterattack between Senlis and Meaux. The following morning, French troops heard the following proclamation: "At the moment when the battle upon which hangs the fate of France is about to begin, all must remember that the time for looking back is past; every effort must be concentrated on attacking and throwing the enemy back."

The first major battle of World War I delivered death on an industrial scale that had not been seen before in warfare. Machine guns and modern cannons mowed down enemy forces. While radio intercepts and aerial reconnaissance used in the battle presaged the future of warfare, echoes of the past remained in the cavalry troops charging on horseback, soldiers in red pantaloons charging behind commanders with swords drawn and drummers providing a musical soundtrack to the battle.

Fresh troops rushed from Paris to the front line thanks to an unlikely means of transport—taxi. Gallieni requisitioned a fleet of 600 Renault taxis to drive 6,000 soldiers from the capital to the battleground. From their wartime service, the vehicles gained the nickname "Taxi de la Marne."

The new troops further pushed the Germans back, and on September 9 they began a retreat north of the Aisne River, where the battle came to an eventual close after a week of fighting that claimed upwards of 100,000 lives on both sides. Dubbed the "Miracle of the Marne," the strategic victory for the Allies proved to be a critical turning point in World War I. Paris had been saved from capture. Notions of a short war had been dashed. The Schlieffen Plan had been torn to tatters.

For the next two months, each side attempted to outflank each other on what became known as the "Race to the Sea." Both sides literally dug in for a long fight as a network of trenches and barbed wire severed Europe from the North Sea to Switzerland by the end of 1914. Both sides bogged down in a slow, bloody grind of trench warfare that would last until the end of the war in 1918. As awful as the First Battle of the Marne was, it would get worse. Edward Spears, a British Expeditionary Force liaison officer, wrote years later in his memoirs, "I am deeply thankful that none of those who gazed across the Aisne of September 14 had the faintest glimmer of what was awaiting them."

American Troops before the battle

The Second Battle of the Marne was the last German offensive of the war. It was the first battle that fresh American troops took part. The German offensive failed and the Allies counterattacked.

The Second Battle of the Marne was the last German offensive of the war. The Germans hoped to make a breakthrough before large numbers of American troops could arrive.

The German were hoping for a breakthrough and their attack began on July 15th when 23 divisions of their First and Third Army attacked east of the Reims River. At the same time an additional 17 division from the German Seventh Army attacked to the west of the river.

The attack by the First and Third Army's were stopped on the first day. The attack to the west of the river was more successful. The Germans successfully established a bridgehead. The German advanced 4 miles on a front that was 12 miles wide. The British and the Americans rushed troops to stem the German advance. They were successful. By July 17 the advance was stopped.

The Allies launched a counter offensive that included eight American divisions and 350 tanks. The offensive was launched on July 18th. By July 20th the Germans ordered a retreat to the lines that they had begun the offensive.

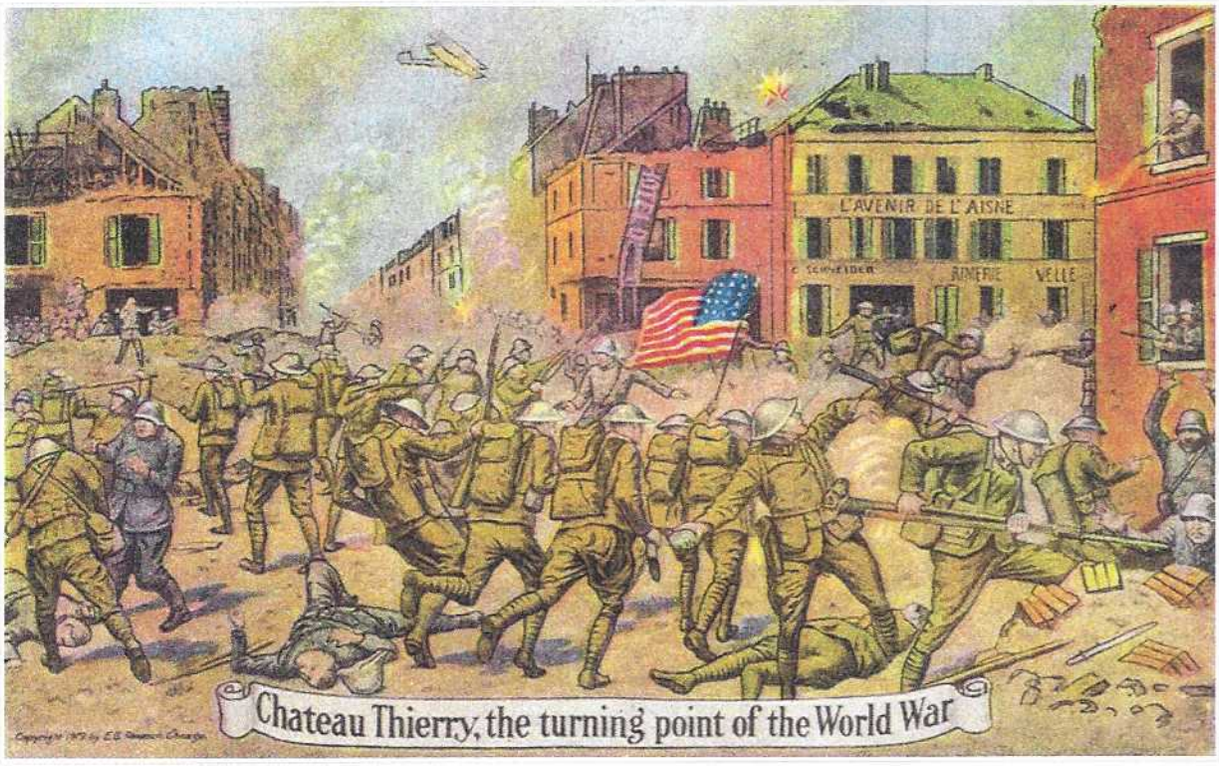
The Battle Marne was a turning point in the war. Besides marking that last German offensive of the war, it marked the entry of American troops into the war. By all accounts despite their lack of experience they equipped themselves bravely in the battles. More importantly the arrival of fresh American troops unburdened by years of warfare strengthened all of the Allies giving the average soldier a feeling that the war might end.

BATTLE OF CHATEAU-THIERRY IN WORLD WAR I

The Battle of Château-Thierry was a significant battle of World War I along the Western Front, which was the line of trenches that stretch through Belgium and northern France on the western edge of Germany. The Western Front involved some of the largest battles of World War I and involved the Allied Nations facing off against the German Army. One of the main reasons that the Battle of Château-Thierry was so significant was because it was the first major conflict that involved American forces in World War I.

The Battle of Château-Thierry took place on May 31st, 1918 and was part of the larger Second Battle of the Marne, which was related to the German Spring Offensives of 1918. As such, a major component of the Battle of Château-Thierry, was Allied forces (French and American soldiers) defending their positions against German attacks. In fact, German General Erich Ludendorff, planned the German attack as an attempt to overwhelm the French defenders in Northern France, and open a path for the German soldiers. For example, the Germans began their assault on the French line and overran the French 6th Army. As a result, The American Expeditionary Force (AEF) under the command of John J. Pershing circled around to assist the French and stop the German advance. More specifically, the Germans were able to push through the French defenses and made it to the Marne River, which was only about 50 miles from the French capital of Paris. As such, the American 3rd Division was mobilized to an important bridge on the Marne River near the town of Château-Thierry on May 31st in 1918 in aid of the French.

The Germans attacked the bridge, as the American and French defenders replied with heavy machinegun fire. The fighting continued with artillery and sniper fire, which led to numerous casualties on both sides. The Allies were successful in preventing a German advance and were even able to carry out their own counter-attack. For example, on July 18th, 1918, French and American forces attacked German positions near Château-Thierry, which caused the Germans to retreat from the area. In all, the Battle of Château-Thierry was an important Allied victory and one of the first engagements for the newly formed American Expeditionary Force in World War I. During the battle, the Americans and French suffered a combined 1,900 casualties, while the Germans endured over 5,300.



A postcard that shows the World War I Battle of Château-Thierry.

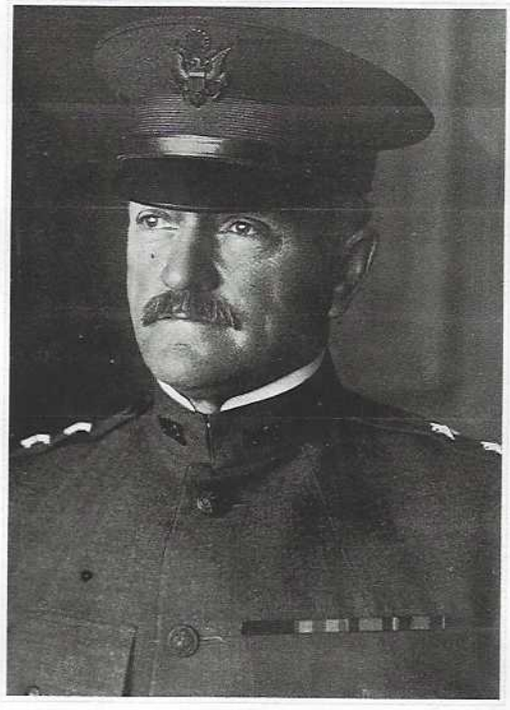
Battle of Belleau Wood at 100

Wednesday, June 06, 2018

June 6, 2018 marks the 100th anniversary of one of the first American offensives—the Battle of Belleau Wood, a pivotal event in World War I and an iconic battle in U.S. Marine Corps history. The Imperial German Army had the initiative on the Western Front in the first half of 1918, and was determined to defeat the Allies before American forces could effectively intervene. But the momentum attained by the German Army wouldn't last. The sheer mass of arriving American reinforcements, along with effective planning by Allied leadership and that of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), seemed likely to tip the scales in the Allies' favor by the summer of 1918.

When the United States entered World War I in April 1917 the U.S. Army was woefully unprepared. The Germans knew this, and believed they could win the war before American units were ready for combat. Defeating Russia in 1917, the Germans shifted vast forces to the Western Front for a series of offensives in the spring of 1918. The first two of these struck the British along the Somme region in France and in Belgium. The third offensive broke through on a broad front between Soissons and Rheims, crossing the Aisne and Vesle Rivers. German forces raced towards the Marne River with their sights set on Paris, which lay about 60 miles to the west. Should the Germans capture the City of Light, there was no telling how the war might end.

As this crisis struck, a handful of U.S. divisions were ready for combat. Gen. John J. Pershing, commander of the AEF, hastily dispatched the U.S. 2nd and 3rd Divisions to reinforce the French Sixth Army in the Aisne-Marne region, desperately contesting the forward edge of the German advance. The 3rd arrived just in time to assist in blocking a crossing of the Marne River at Chateau-Thierry. The 2nd, which included one Army brigade and one brigade of Marines, blocked the main road to Paris in the vicinity of Lucy-le-Bocage. Despite growing Allied resistance , the Germans were not easily deterred. They continued probing the front line, determined to find a weak point they could exploit.



In response the 2nd spread out along their front, putting the Marine brigade opposite Belleau Wood, a dense mile and a half long forest. A withdrawing officer from a French unit recommended that the Marines withdraw as well. To this Capt. Lloyd Williams famously replied, "Retreat, Hell! We just got here!" The Marines dug in where they were, and prepared for the inevitable German attack.

The Germans hammered the American positions with artillery, mortars, machine guns and poison gas. On the afternoon of June 3, they swarmed out of the woods to launch a major attack into the positions held by the Marines. The Marines and supporting Army units held their fire until the Germans were within a hundred yards, then swept them away with well-aimed rifle marksmanship. For two days the Germans repeatedly attacked all along the front, and were repulsed with heavy losses.

On June 6 the Marine brigade, under the command of Army Brig. Gen. James Harbord and supported by 2nd Division artillery units, went over to the offensive. They penetrated into Belleau Wood, suffering substantial casualties. The fighting for Belleau Wood eddied and swirled over the next two weeks, with both sides pouring in replacements and reinforcements, attacking or counter-attacking, momentarily pausing, and attacking or counter-attacking again. Units bypassed each other in the broken terrain, creating further confusion as they emerged in each other's rear. Brutal close quarters fighting became the norm, amidst terrain pock-marked with shell fragments and mustard gas.

The carnage in Belleau Wood became a brutal test of wills. The Germans were committed to embarrass this fledgling American effort, discouraging Allied hope for eventual victory. The Americans were even more determined to prove themselves. By June 15 the Marine brigade controlled the southern half of the woods. Soldiers from the 3rd temporarily replaced the Marines, who pulled out to rest and refurbish.

The Marines infiltrated back into Belleau Wood between June 22 and 24, refreshed and ready to end the battle. Following an intense Army-led artillery barrage, they attacked on June 25. Stunned and exhausted, German resistance collapsed. Over 500 surrendered as the well-rehearsed Marine attack ground on through the woods. German counterattacks were bloodily repulsed. On June 26 a Marine battalion commander tersely reported "Woods now U.S. Marine Corps entirely."

The Battle of Belleau Wood marked the debut of the U.S. Marine Corps as a modern, ground-combat force capable of sustained combat. The striking performance of U.S. forces in Belleau Wood proved as heartening to the Allies as it did discouraging to the Germans.

America's deadliest battle: World War I's Meuse-Argonne Offensive 100 years later

Argonne Forest

By , ,

Published September 26, 2018

Fox News

American soldiers in the Army's 108th Field Artillery – under fire from enemy gas shells – strike back in Varennes-en-Argonne, France. (National WWI Museum and Memorial)

A century ago Wednesday, the first shots were fired in one of the most important American military engagements ever – and the deadliest battle in U.S. history.

World War I's Meuse-Argonne Offensive, which involved more than a million American soldiers and claimed the lives of 26,277, was launched in northern France on Sept. 26, 1918 to push the German army out of the country and reclaim a rail network vital to supplying enemy troops. The fight lasted a grueling 46 days and generated scores of stories of heroism and sacrifice.

But most notably, it helped bring an end to The Great War.

"In its scale and in the number of American and French troops involved, not only infantry but artillery, tanks, engineers… just the logistics in this, made it the largest operation that the American armed forces had been in to that point," Doran Cart, a senior curator

American soldiers near Bourgeuilles ride on top of tanks on the way to the

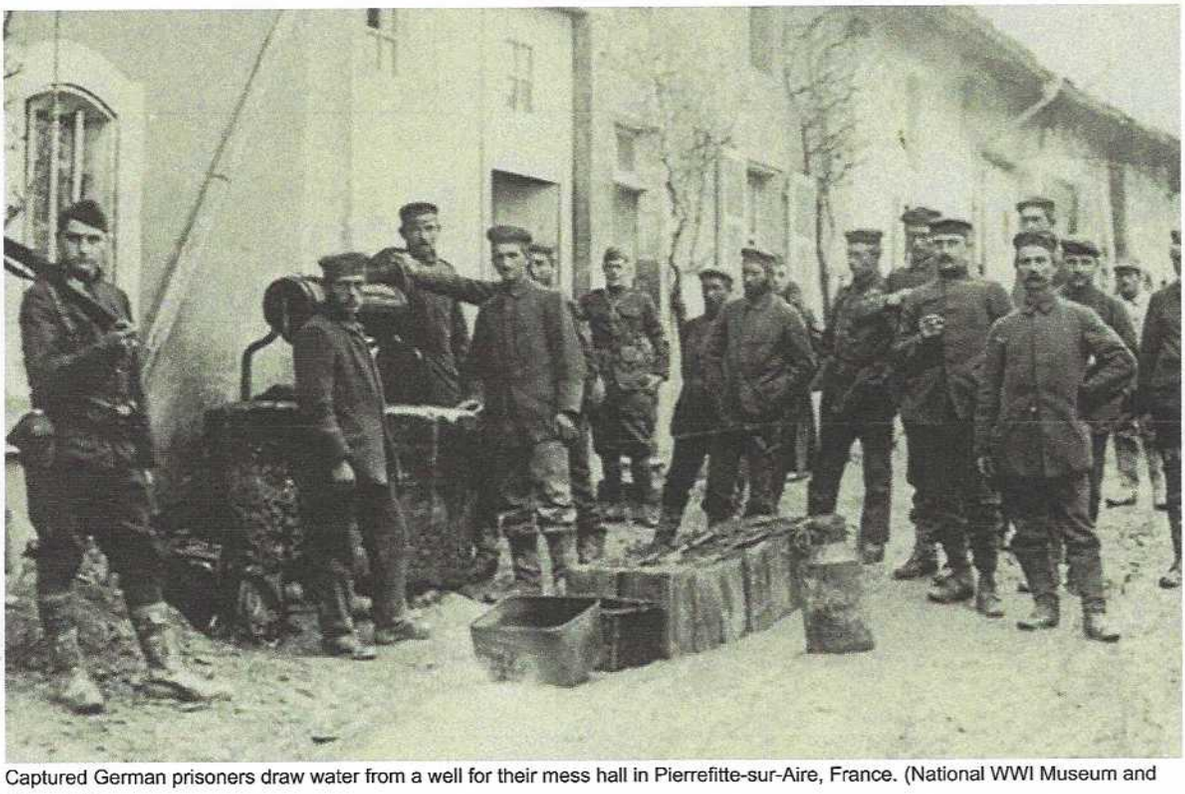
Photos of the battle the museum shared with Fox News provide a glimpse of the emotions and constant threats both sides endured.

In one photo, American troops donning gas masks amid a chemical attack are also seen firing back at the Germans with their own artillery strike. Another shows the sullen faces of German prisoners-of-war as they draw water from a well for their mess hall.

The offensive started Sept. 26, with the French town of Verdun as the centerpiece of the Allied operations, Cart says.

American infantry forces, supported by 2,700 pieces of artillery, 189 tanks, and 821 aircraft, according to the U.S. Army Center of Military History, spread out in an area about 15 to 20 miles wide, bordered by the Meuse River on one end and the thick Argonne Forest on the other.

The Allies' mission was to fight northward and break through a heavily-fortified network of German defenses that ran about 15 miles



Captured German prisoners draw water from a well for their mess hall in Pierrefitte-sur-Aire, France. (National WWI Museum and Memorial)

"This was a very well defended area, but it was basically the last well-defended area on the Western Front," Cart told Fox News.

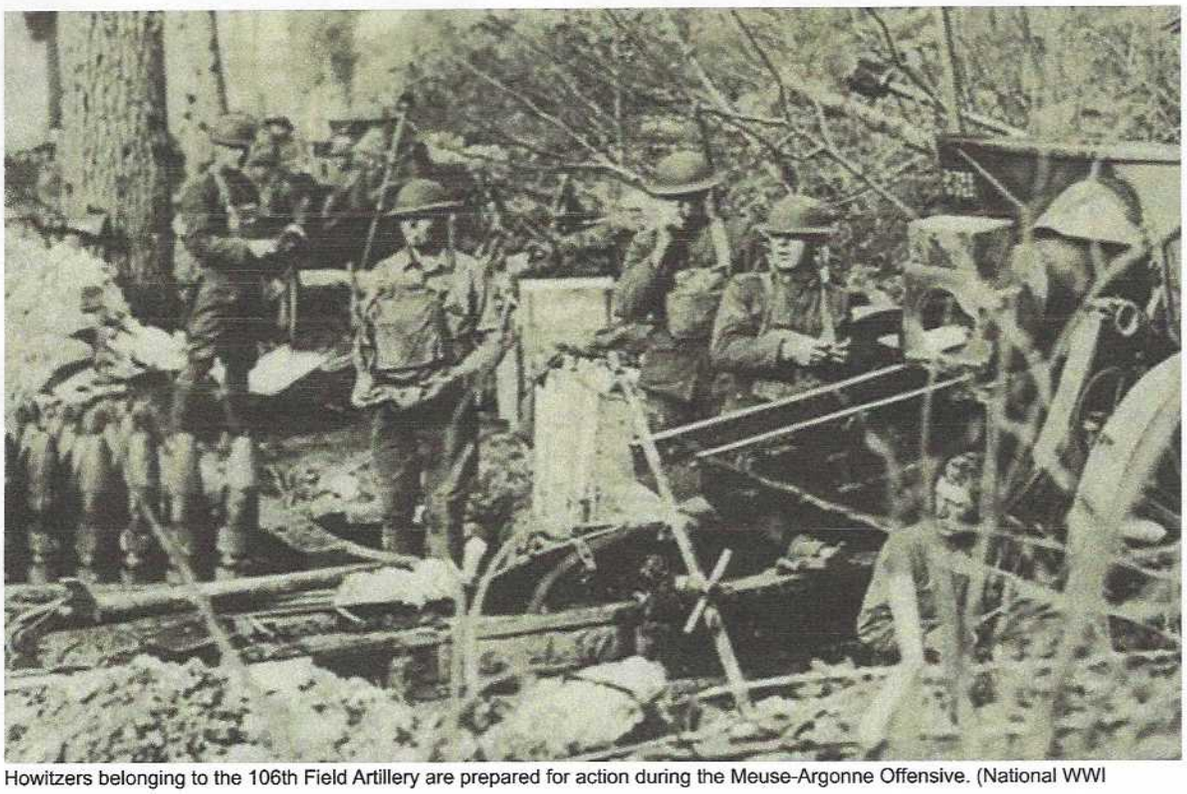
The American forces at the start of the offensive quickly gained ground, but rainy, muddy weather in the following days stalled it and gave the Germans time to regroup.

By the end of September, the U.S. troops pushed eight miles into the German defenses and took 9,000 of them prisoner, the U.S. Army Center of Military History says.

The Argonne Forest and its surrounding areas was one of the focal points of the battle in October, and the rugged, unpredictable terrain contributed to massive amounts of American casualties.

"The main factor in all of this was that it was a different kind of fighting than what had occurred before in World War I," Cart told Fox News. "This wasn't trench to trench -- this was getting up and attacking the enemy and when you do that you are a lot more exposed."

Cart says 60 percent of all battlefield deaths in World War I were caused by artillery, and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive had plenty



Howitzers belonging to the 106th Field Artillery are prepared for action during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. (National WWI Museum and Memorial)

"The number of artillery pieces used in this offensive was staggering," he said. "So it was everywhere."

By early November, the U.S. forces reached their objective and on the 11th, an armistice was signed between the Allies and Germans, ending the war. That day every year has become the American holiday Veterans Day.

The Meuse-Argonne Offensive, left 28,000 Germans dead as well, according to the Army Heritage Center.

One of the most famous stories to come out of the offensive was the exploits of the "Lost Battalion," a group of American soldiers who ended up getting surrounded in the Argonne Forest by the Germans.

During one rescue attempt of the soldiers, American artillery forces accidentally started shelling their own men.

"WE ARE ALONG THE ROAD PARALELL 276.4. OUR ARTILLERY IS DROPPING A BARRAGE DIRECTLY ON US. FOR HEAVENS SAKE STOP IT," Maj. Charles W. Whittlesey cried out in a message affixed to a carrier pigeon that flew to his compatriots nearby.

The troops held their position for five days and nights and eventually were rescued, but ended up losing 107 men, according to statistics from the National Archives.

Army Air Force Lt. Harold E. Goettler and Lt. Erwin R. Bleckley managed to assist in the rescue effort by dropping supplies to the stranded troops from a plane – one of first times that American forces did so, Cart says, and both went on to earn the Medal of Honor, along with Whittlesey and other soldiers.

"Heroism at that time was recognized as doing something beyond the regard for themselves," Cart told Fox News. "They had to do something that took them out of their own safety zone and saving other humans."