



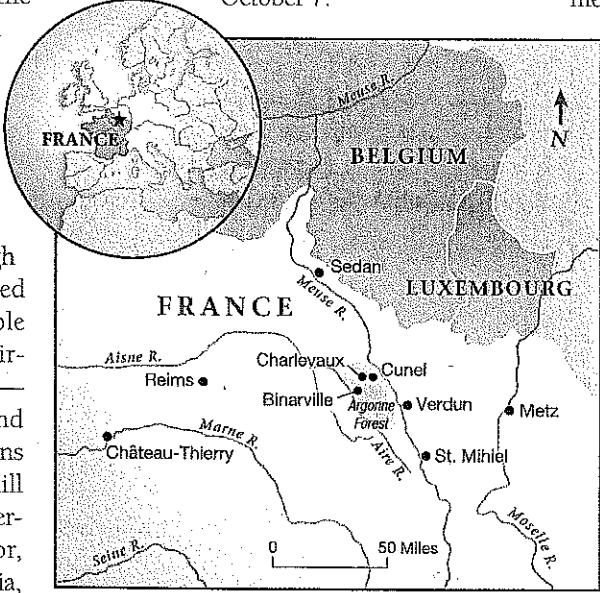
In late October 1918, officers of the 308th Regiment of First Army's 77th division review battle plans at their camp near Apremont in the Argonne Forest.

American divisions attempted to relieve Whittlesey's beleaguered force and clear the Argonne Forest. Savage fighting meanwhile continued elsewhere, with the U.S. 3rd Division driving on the most important German stronghold in the entire Meuse-Argonne, the Heights of Romagne. Among 3rd Division's doughboys was an 18-year-old private and scout from rural Missouri, John L. "Jack" Barkley.

The Germans still held the crest of Hill 253, although the 7th Regiment occupied its southern slopes. The trouble was that nobody—including airplanes, for it was a rainy day—could see into the valley behind Hill 253. What were the Germans up to? Were they reinforcing Hill 253? Were they preparing a counter-attack? Jack Barkley's superior, Sergeant Nayhone, a native of Syria, ordered him to follow the unoccupied ridge, take a position overlooking the valley beyond Hill 253's northern slope and find out. His position would be in no-man's-land, close to the enemy lines, dangerously exposed and well beyond help should the Germans find

out he was there. To Barkley, it looked like a suicide mission.

"If you want to bump me off, for God's sake do it here!" he yelled during a face-off with the sergeant in a candlelit command post just after midnight on October 7.



"We've got to have information," Nayhone replied. "You can see for yourself there's no way out. Somebody's got to go." He reached out his hand, and Barkley, after a brief hesitation, shook it.

"I know you'll do the best you can... And no hard feelings!" the sergeant said.

"All right," Barkley replied. "No hard feelings!... But write a nice letter home to my folks."

Accompanied by two signal corps men carrying a phone and laying wire, Barkley followed the ridge for two hours and settled into a deep crater. The signalers gave him the phone—set not to ring, but to make a slight buzz—and trotted off in the dark. Hopefully any German patrols that came across the wire they had laid would not think to trace it—and hopefully it would not be cut. Barkley tested the phone, and Nayhone spoke on the other end. "Don't phone anything not of major importance," the sergeant said in his Middle Eastern accent. "You're too close to them. They might hear you."

At daylight Barkley found that he had chosen his post well.

He had an unobstructed view over the entire valley, from Hill 250, behind and to his right, to Hill 253, ahead and to his left. In the woods on the opposite side of the valley from Hill 253, German troops moved busily about, evidently



The offensive continued until the November 11 Armistice. Major Charles Whittlesey of 1st Battalion (inset) earned promotion to lieutenant colonel.

with the intention of crossing the valley in front of Barkley and launching a counterattack against the 7th Regiment on the southern slopes of Hill 253. Barkley reported to Nayhorne and awaited the Germans' next move while contemplating the dead doughboys whose bodies lay in dense windrows over the hillside. In the early afternoon an enemy barrage began, landing on Hill 250 and sweeping west toward the southern edge of Hill 253. Nayhorne reassured Barkley over the phone. "Stay with it as long as you can," he said. "Take care of yourself. If anything..." And the line went dead.

**W**ith his phone line cut, there seemed nothing left for Barkley to do except return to headquarters. Seventy-five yards away along the ridge, however, he saw an abandoned French light tank. Dozens of dead Germans scattered the ground around it, and Barkley imagined what he could do with a machine gun in the tank when the Germans moved into the valley. Nearby, he spotted a Maxim light machine gun and some boxes of ammunition among a cluster of dead Germans. Their comrades likely would have disabled the Maxim by

removing its breechblock. But Barkley remembered what an officer had told him at intelligence school. The first chance he got, the officer had suggested, he should take the breechblock out of a captured German machine gun and carry it with him—you never knew when it might come in handy. Barkley checked his hip pocket. The breech, which he had picked up many weeks before, was still there.

Dodging from hole to hole, Barkley reached the machine gun without being spotted. Across the valley, he saw Germans at the edge of the woods with grenades, machine guns and other equipment. They looked ready to move. Suddenly a smoke barrage fell between him and the Germans, and the soldiers disappeared from view. In an instant, Barkley realized what he could accomplish under cover of the screen. Grabbing the gun and ammunition, he sprinted for the tank and hopped inside. The little Renault was empty, except for a bloody leather helmet on the floor. Its turret machine gun had been removed.

Barkley examined his Maxim. Its breechblock, as he expected, was missing, so he snapped his spare into place, and it fit perfectly. Except for a nearly

empty water jacket—the Maxim was water-cooled, to prevent overheating—the gun seemed in excellent working order. The next priority was ammunition. Barkley had picked up a few boxes, but not enough for extended firing. Fortunately, a number of dead enemy machine gunners lay nearby, surrounded by boxes of ammunition that the Germans had never got around to recovering. Barkley gathered up the boxes, stuffing as many inside the tank as he could and stacking the rest just outside the hatch. He climbed in, emptied several boxes of ammunition and slung up the belts for easy access, with one across his shoulder. Then he rotated the turret to face the woods where he had seen the Germans. He avoided poking his gun out the gun port, lest they see it and discover something was amiss.

The gun port was too big for the Maxim—it had been built for a larger weapon—and Barkley would have only partial protection from enemy bullets. But with the smoke screen fading, it was too late to back out now. Barkley tried not to think. "My legs felt wobbly. I hoped if there was any God, he'd give me the breaks. Then I forgot everything, for through my port I'd caught a glimpse of movement at the edge of

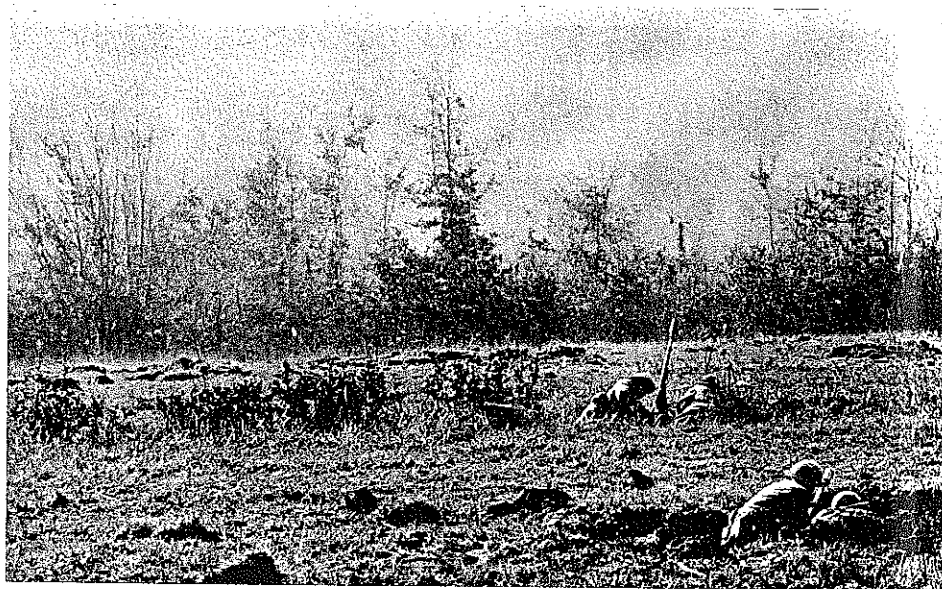
the woods." Moving in squad columns and sending up flares, the Germans marched out of the woods and into the open, passing diagonally across Barkley's front toward Hill 253. He estimated 500 or 600 men, an entire infantry battalion. The closest were 200 yards from his tank.

Turning the turret slowly to follow their progress, Barkley waited until the end of the German formation had left the woods and the front had begun climbing Hill 253. He then took a deep breath, edged his gun out through the port, chose his direction of fire, exhaled, aimed the gun toward the waist of the nearest enemy soldier and pulled the trigger. When the Maxim erupted, the Germans reeled in surprise. None of them, evidently, could tell where the fire was coming from. For a few moments they stood paralyzed. Then they saw the Renault and looked for cover. But they were caught in the open.

Barkley fired the Maxim in alternating short and long bursts. "The German who carried that gun," he discovered, "had her beautifully adjusted. She fairly purred." He raked the infantry, and then massacred a group of officers. One of them, a "big fat fellow," fell as he waddled toward the woods; another tried to pull him in, and Barkley shot him too. The Germans had, meanwhile, begun to return fire with rifles and machine guns. As each bullet hit the turret, Barkley thought his eardrums would explode. Several bullets got in through the gun port, some of them evidently fired by a smart enemy sniper. Miraculously, they didn't hit Barkley, and he kept firing. The gun overheated, and when it started to smoke, he emptied his canteen into the jacket. The water boiled and evaporated immediately, almost scalding his hands. Barkley had to slow his rate of fire.

Eventually a patrol of about 20 Germans moved toward the tank. They carried two light machine guns and a lot of grenades. Barkley killed one of the machine gunners, but the other made it to a shell hole about 75 yards away.

*"That fellow with the Maxim used his head. He started firing straight at the barrel of my*



The Argonne Forest battlefield was pockmarked with craters, providing scant cover. Private John Barkley

*gun. If he had hit it, he'd have put the gun out of commission. I whirled the turret toward him. He was a brave man. He stood up in his shell hole and, with head and shoulders exposed, he tried to beat me to getting a burst home. The odds were all on me. I swung the sights just below his gun and fired. I was sorry. But it had to be one of us."*

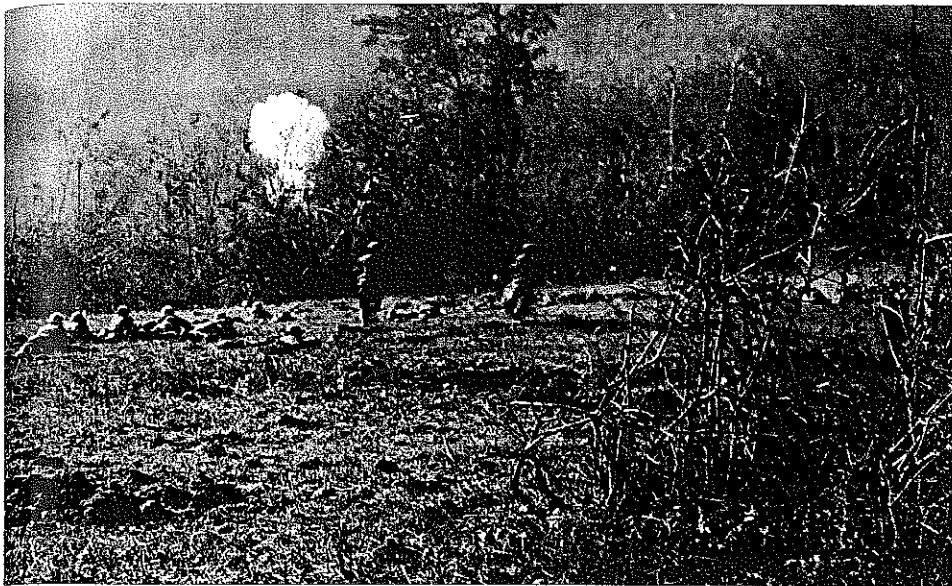
With the second machine gun out of action, the rest of the patrol ran up and threw their grenades. The grenades bounced off harmlessly, but as the infantry moved closer, one of them eventually would find a hatch or the port. They ran quickly from cover to cover, and Barkley couldn't get at them. Suddenly a shell burst among them—a German 77—and the infantry fled.

**W**ith one crisis gone, Barkley faced another. The artillery piece could blow his tank to scrap. He frantically searched for the gun as the shells crept closer. Two explosions straddled him in quick succession as he sighted the gun at the edge of the woods, 600 yards away. Before he could pull the trigger, "There was a terrific crash—on the tank, in the air, inside the tank. A sharp blow against my chin—a ringing in my ears—and blackness." He came to consciousness with a strangling sensation and a weight on his chest. The weight was a heavy box of ammunition,

which he threw off; the strangling came from smoke, intense heat and lack of air. Blood poured from Barkley's nose, and his throat was scorched and dry. He craved air and water. Then he realized that no bullets were ricocheting off his tank. He threw open the turret's rear hatch and pushed his head out, gasping. When he had recovered sufficiently to look around, he saw the Germans still climbing Hill 253, this time under fire from American machine guns. They showed no interest in Barkley, apparently thinking him dead.

Barkley got back in the tank, closed the door and examined his Maxim. The stock was cracked, but it otherwise looked all right. Getting his ammunition back in order, he rotated the turret back to where he had seen the 77 just before he was hit. He found it, the gunners walking unconcernedly about it. Six hundred yards was a long way, but Barkley measured the range carefully. He fired a whole belt at the artillery piece, saturating it thoroughly. The 77 gave him no more trouble after that, but the German infantry woke up—no doubt cursing heartily—and again peppered the Renault with bullets.

The Maxim started jamming repeatedly. Barkley cleared the jams, but the rate of fire slowed until it became single shot, like a rifle. Figuring the end had come, he slid down into the driver's compartment and waited for a chance



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

(below) holed up in a derelict tank with a discarded machine gun and held off an entire German battalion.

to bail out and run for the woods. Then he saw a can of thin oil. Grabbing the can, Barkley climbed back onto the gun

compartment and poured the oil into the water jacket. It worked, just in time for him to fend off another grenade-toting German patrol. As the patrol fled, he resumed firing on the infantry struggling up Hill 253. The oil in the gun jacket boiled, filling the turret with acrid black smoke. Then the gun jammed again, and Barkley thought his part in the war had ended.

*"I just sat there, with my head in my hands, waiting.*

*I told myself I was waiting for the gun to cool off. But it was really the end I was waiting for: I couldn't hold out much longer with a gun that would fire only once in a while."*

Suddenly, he heard the sound of artillery shells bursting nearby. This time they were not aimed at his tank. Instead, they exploded all along the northern slopes of Hill 253 among the German infantry. American infantry and machine gunners joined in, and soon the Germans could take no more. Breaking, they ran back down the hill,

through the American barrage, across the valley and into the woods on the other side. Barkley opened the tank

door and tumbled to the ground outside, feeling half dead and sick to his stomach. An American officer and 25 men from the 7th Regiment walked toward him.

"What the devil are you doing here?" the officer asked, looking incredulously at Barkley's filthy uniform and blood-matted whiskers. Barkley replied that he had been in the tank. "You certainly look like hell," the

officer replied, and after directing the bedraggled private back to his regiment, he and his patrol moved off. As Barkley staggered back along the ridge and into the woods, he heard explosions behind him. He saw a salvo of huge, 6-inch shells exploding around the tank. The German heavy artillery had finally found his range.

**A**s Jack Barkley walked away from his tank, the crisis of the Lost Battalion was reaching its peak. By the afternoon of October 7, the




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Germans surrounding the Lost Battalion were themselves at risk of encirclement by the U.S. relief forces. Desperate to capture Whittlesey and his men before withdrawing from the Argonne, the Germans mounted one last attack, but the Lost Battalion's survivors managed to throw them back.

By midday the attacks of the 28th and 82nd Divisions forced the Germans to start withdrawing from the Argonne Forest. The 77th Division pursued immediately, inflicting considerable casualties on the Germans and collecting many prisoners. With the German lines crumbling, Brig. Gen. Evan Johnson ordered the 307th Regiment's First Battalion to advance up the ravine south of Charlevaux Valley, capture Ridge 198 and relieve the Lost Battalion.

Whittlesey and Captain George McMurtry were sitting in their foxhole a little after 7 p.m., talking in low voices, when a runner hurtled in between them. An American officer and a few men had just appeared on the right, the runner breathlessly reported. They wanted to see the commanding officer. Relief had arrived.

The men of the Lost Battalion were too exhausted to celebrate. There were no demonstrations of joy; there was no cheering. Instead, men turned to one another and silently shook hands or quietly told wounded soldiers about the good news. The relieving troops distributed all the reserve rations they were carrying and stood guard while Whittlesey's soldiers ate and went to sleep. In the morning trucks and ambulances arrived. Only 194 of the men could still walk; 144 more had to be taken out on stretchers. The rest of the Lost Battalion's original 554 men left in coffins.

Captain George McMurtry, Major Charles Whittlesey and Private John L. Barkley were all awarded Medals of Honor. 

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