



## Activity: Geography is War: The Lost Battalion



### Guiding question:

How do geography and terrain influence the experiences and outcomes of battle?

**DEVELOPED BY TERESA GOODIN**

**Grade Level(s):** 9-12

**Subject(s):** Social Studies, Geography, Art

## Overview

Students will analyze primary source accounts from members of the Lost Battalion to understand the role they played in World War I, the importance of terrain and geography, and how the men surmounted these difficulties as they held their position.

## Historical Context

The Lost Battalion learned the importance of geography during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. During the chaos of battle, members of the 77<sup>th</sup> Division became separated from the rest of their division. Surrounded by German troops, they found themselves with their lines of communication compromised and without means of reaching food, fresh water, or other supplies. The men held their position for five days, but suffered heavy casualties. The survivors of the Lost Battalion owed much to the deep ravine where they took cover as it provided them with some protection from German mortars.

## Objectives

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to

- Analyze primary source excerpts to pull out key events from the battle;
- Link knowledge about war and geography to the specific situation of the Lost Battalion; and
- Communicate the challenges faced by these men in a product.

## Standards Connections

### Connections to Common Core

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

*“To understand the many facets of war, one must almost see it to believe it. The victory of the Lost Battalion is an example of how sometimes heart and hard work are not enough to overcome the obstacles of battle. The men of the Lost Battalion survived for five days in their isolated position and were constantly barraged by German machine gun fire and other weapons. They bravely continued fighting, and their determination, as well as the unique terrain of the area eventually led to the Americans pushing west through the Argonne to force the Germans to abandon the front facing the 77<sup>th</sup> Division. In this lesson students learn how “geography is war,” and the unique protective terrain provided a bit of luck that led to a moral victory for the Americans, which encouraged our men to keep fighting another day.”*  
—Teresa Goodin

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear among the key details and ideas.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

## Connections to C3 Framework

**D2.Geo.4.9-12.** Analyze relationships and interactions within and between human and physical systems to explain reciprocal influences that occur among them.

**D2.His.1.9-12.** Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

**D2.His.14.9-12.** Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects on events in the past.

**D2.His.15.9-12.** Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

## Documents Used ★ indicates an ABMC source

### Primary Sources

[Joshua Chamberlain, Dedication of the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine Volunteer Infantry Regiment Monument, Gettysburg, Pa. \(excerpt\)](#)

Excerpts by soldiers from: Robert J. Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion, Beyond the Rumors, Myths and Legends of America's Famous WWI Epic* (Waterford, WI: American Expeditionary Foundation, 2006)

### Secondary Sources

Teresa Goodin, "Lost Battalion Background Essay"

## Materials

- Joshua Chamberlain Dedication Handout
- Primary Source Excerpts Handout
- Primary Source Analysis Worksheet

- Comparison Worksheet
- Lost Battalion Menu Handout
- Lost Battalion Background Essay
- Lost Battalion Rubric

## Lesson Preparation

- Print or make available electronically one copy of the Lost Battalion Background Essay and the Primary Source Excerpts Handout for each student.
- Make copies of the following handouts for each student. The number of copies will vary depending on which source analysis option is used:
  - Joshua Chamberlain Dedication Handout
  - Primary Source Analysis Worksheet
  - Comparison Worksheet
  - Lost Battalion Menu Handout

## Procedure

### Activity One (15 minutes)

- Pass out the Joshua Chamberlain Dedication Handout.
- Ask Students: *What do you think Joshua Chamberlain meant by the words he spoke at the dedication of the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine Volunteer Infantry Regiment at Gettysburg?*
  - **Teacher Tip:** Answers will vary. Possible answers include: on great battlefields a spirit and memory remain; people come to remember and commemorate acts of valor on battlefields; people come to thank fallen soldiers for their sacrifice.

### Activity Two (60 minutes)

- Hand out the Primary Source Excerpts Handout. Explain to students that they will be reading primary and secondary sources about the Lost Battalion, a group of American soldiers who became separated from other American forces in the middle of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.
- Choose one of three options for conducting the source analysis:
  - Option One: Each student reads each source and completes a Primary Source Analysis Worksheet for each (to modify, teachers may choose fewer sources or have students choose from a group of sources).
  - Option Two: Students work in a jigsaw group. Students first meet in expert groups, in which students will analyze the same source using the Primary Source Analysis Worksheet. Then students meet in “jigsaw groups,” or groups with students that have read different sources to compare and contrast the varying accounts. Students in the jigsaw group complete the Lost Battalion Comparison Worksheet.

- Option Three: Students are assigned to groups of 1 - 6 and each student group reads two different sources. The group compares and contrasts each student's sources. Each group member completes the Comparison Worksheet.
- Closure: Ask students how the Lost Battalion soldiers' personal accounts reflect the statement by Joshua Chamberlain they read at the beginning of the activity.

## Assessment

- Students will choose an option from the Lost Battalion Menu Handout to demonstrate understanding of how geography and terrain impacted the Lost Battalion.
- Menu products will be assessed using the Lost Battalion Rubric.

## Methods for Extension

- Menu products may be modified with regard to technology. Students may create iMovies, digital documentaries, podcasts, or voice recordings if technology permits.

## Adaptations

- Sources may be modified to accommodate various reading levels.
- Choice of menu assignment allows for individual learning styles and preferences.

# Joshua Chamberlain Dedication Handout

[Joshua Chamberlain, Dedication of the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine Volunteer Infantry Regiment Monument, Gettysburg, Pa. \(excerpt\)](#)

"In great deeds something abides. On great fields something stays. Forms change and pass; bodies disappear, but spirits linger, to consecrate ground for the vision-place of souls. And reverent men and women from afar, and generations that know us not and that we know not of, heart-drawn to see where and by whom great things were suffered and done for them, shall come to this deathless field to ponder and dream; And lo! the shadow of a mighty presence shall wrap them in its bosom, and the power of the vision pass into their souls."

# Primary Source Excerpts Handout

**Robert J. Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion, Beyond the Rumors, Myths and Legends of America's Famous WWI Epic* (Waterford, WI: American Expeditionary Foundation, 2006) (excerpts).**

## **Private McCollum (32), p. 204**

"...We were given orders to cut a path through the underbrush...much to our surprise, we (were not) fired upon. We came to a bend in the ravine (and) could see why we had come through without being molested. In a little clearing in front of us was what remained of a large building...One of our shells had made a direct hit on the roof...Hardly had we reached this opening when we were strafed with machine gun and sniper fire. There was no place for us to go except straight up the hillside... Quickly we climbed to a ridge and safety near the crest of the hill..."

## **Private Julius Langer of Company H (44), p. 272**

"I was alone in the hole I dug. I had only a mess kit spoon and a bayonet to dig with, but it is wonderful how fast one can dig when bullets are whistling around. There was dirt flying in all directions for a few minutes and it was everybody for themselves."

## **Lt. Eager, (161, 234), p. 272**

"The lieutenant in charge of G Company...had dug him out a nice fox hole and he was sitting down there and it looked like he was safe and Lt. Harrington, who went up there with me, and I were standing there talking to him. He was sitting down in his foxhole with rock piled up in front of him, which he had dug out in digging his foxhole and it looked like good protection. While we were standing there a German grenade thrown from above the road on top of the hill...came down there and landed right on the rocks and just cut his face to pieces. Lieutenant Harrington got a slug (sic) through the shoulder out of it too (but) I did not get a scratch although I was standing just as close as any of them...I took over the company (G) from then on, being the ranking officer..."

## **Lt. Wilhelm, (20), p. 295**

"I took ten men and worked for a hundred and fifty yards to see if there was a possible chance for the company advancing between the machine gun firing from the foot of the hill and the infantry company above us.... After five of these men had been shot, I determined that this was not feasible and started back toward the remainder of the company, only to find that the Germans had swung down in between myself and the rest of the company. We were cut off...The only thing left for us was

to head straight up the hill...We had (only) advanced 5 or 6 yards (when) we found that there were Germans all around us. They were shouting to one another and evidently had some idea we were in the vicinity, so we crawled into thick underbrush and lay there all during that day.

A little path...evidently lead to a German gun position...for during the day the Germans were passing...so close we could hear what they said. After dark, we decided it would be much safer to work back in smaller groups...in the general direction of the American lines. It took us from 8.00pm to 12.00am that night to go an eighth of a mile.

Directly in front of us were three stretches of barbed wire 30 yards across, protected by machine guns...We started working through this wire, our progress being necessarily slow as every time a flare went up we would have to stand perfectly rigid until it had died out. They fired frequently with machine guns, searching the wire for any enemy that might be there...As luck would have it, we got through safely...to our own posts."

**Private John, Company A (220), p. 301**

"My buddy and I were lying in our little...foxhole, keeping watch of the Germans coming in behind us. They were hollering as they were passing through an open space in the timber. I told him that the next time one came out, I was going to cut loose. We weren't the only ones who had the same idea. My gun barrel got so hot I couldn't touch it with my bare hands. They didn't scare us as much as they thought they would..."

**Private Sydney Smith (256), p. 302**

"When I got to him, the bullet had come straight down his rifle barrel and took both the sights off and hit him right in the temple. He was still alive and every time he would breathe, a bubble of blood would raise on the side of his head. I couldn't get him up out of the mud and water; he'd have had the cloths shot off him in a little bit. I had to just let him lay there in the mud all that time...But he was still laying there alive when they came through there days later and took us out of there."

**Lt. Griffin, Co H – writing to his wife (20, 106), p. 314**

"The picture I have of you has a hole in it from a piece of shell. I have four bullet holes in my overcoat and my trousers were torn to pieces by a grenade, but I only have my knees cut besides the bullet in my shoulder. The strap to my field glasses was cut by a bullet, my gas mask was cut in half by shrapnel, and my helmet has a dent from a bullet. But they did not get me..."

**Captain Rainsford, first glimpse of ravine (103), p. 345**

"A steep and narrow ravine, its sides choked with brush and wire, the crests to the right and left

held with machine guns, rifle and hand grenades, a long distance machine gun fire sweeping down its length from the north and the first ranging shells wailing in from across the hills. Roncesvalles or Thermopylae may have looked so to their assaulting columns, grim in the sunset light; and the thought rose unbidden to the mind – what a place for men to die.”

**Private Joseph Lehmeier, (44), p. 358**

“John J. Knettel and Joseph Materna...and myself were in a dugout and a German grenade lit on Joe’s back. I grabbed it and threw it back and about 20 feet away from us, it went off. Joe got his ear cut and I got my head full of small particles from it, which made my head bleed considerably. If I had not thrown it back, the three of us would have been killed.”

**Private Minder describes action in the Ravine d’Argonne in a letter back home (37), p. 369**

“We all had to go up and help the infantry on a raiding party...(so) we went over to the left about a hundred yards...mounted our guns a little higher up on the side of the hill and were told to shoot over their heads whenever we saw a flash from the other side of the valley. That was where the Germans were and also on top of the hill. The infantry started off and in about five minutes little red flashes like fireflies could be seen all over the place. They even seemed to come from the top of the trees...(and) every time we saw a flash, we sent a few shots over in that general direction (and) were very busy changing the gun from one point to another. (But) in a half hour it was all over...”

**2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Clarence Davis, 308<sup>th</sup> (29), p. 392**

“We were subjected to terrific machine gun fire. The fire of our own artillery did not seem to damage the wire much. They could not find it among the trees. The green men fought remarkably well; you never saw such bravery. But unfortunately, their lack of knowledge of automatic rifles soon exhausted our supply of ammunition as they fired whole clips at a burst and were soon within ten feet of the German’s strongly entrenched position with our ammunition gone. We took what we could from our fallen comrades and looked in vain for supporting platoons. (But) instead of supporting platoons, Germans came around behind us as well as in front. My knowledge of the Argonne drive from here on is hearsay, for I was captured and sent to a German hospital...”

**Unnamed soldier (21), p. 395**

“Bullets flayed the soil in straight streaks, breaking the stiffened limbs of corpses, perforating and ripping up the bodies, plunging into the vacant faces, bespattering the dried out eyes. We feel the heavens burst over our heads and the earth opening under our feet. Everything is swept away by the blasts of a tornado of projectiles.”

# Primary Source Analysis Worksheet

1. Summarize the source(s) in a few words or phrases.
2. Who is/are the author(s) of the source? What do you know about them?
3. What is the topic or main idea of the source? What did the soldier want to convey?
4. What did you learn from the source about the daily life of a soldier in the Lost Battalion in early October 1918?
5. What did you learn from the source about how the terrain impacted the experience of the Lost Battalion? Be specific.
6. What else did you learn about the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, Lost Battalion, and World War I from the source?
7. What is the historical significance of this source?

# Comparison Worksheet

1. What similarities do the sources reveal about the experiences of individual members of the Lost Battalion?

2. What differences do the sources reveal about the experiences of individual members of the Lost Battalion?

3. Based on what you have read from primary source excerpts from the Lost Battalion, write a paragraph that answers the guiding question: How do geography and terrain influence the experiences and outcomes of battle?

# Lost Battalion Menu Worksheet

**Directions:** Choose **one** of the options below to demonstrate your understanding of how terrain impacted the men of the Lost Battalion. Use the Lost Battalion Background Essay and/or Lost Battalion Primary Source Excerpts Handout to complete the option you choose.

1. Write a three to five minute dramatization of the experiences of the men of the Lost Battalion at Meuse-Argonne using at least five quotes from the sources. The dramatization should include details from the sources, including the geographical obstacles overcome by the Lost Battalion.
2. Write an account of what happened to the Lost Battalion from the soldiers' perspective. Your work should be all original text, with a few quotes, and must cite any quotes correctly. The essay should describe the men and situation of the Lost Battalion and the impact terrain had on their experience and be at least two pages in length.
3. Create a series of illustrations that represent the men and situation of the Lost Battalion and how terrain impacted the men. You must have three to five illustrations and each must have a caption. You may use pencil, colored pencil, charcoal, or other medium approved by the teacher.

# Lost Battalion Background Essay

Between the uneven ground, ravines, and streams of the Argonne Forest to the east and Meuse River to the west was a landscape of fields and rolling hills. It was in this setting that the U.S. Army faced entrenched German troops with the goal of breaking through German lines and proceeding through northern France to the borders of Belgium and Luxembourg.

One of the instrumental divisions in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive was the 77<sup>th</sup> Division, sometimes referred to as the Statue of Liberty Division, as it was mainly composed of soldiers from New York City. The men, from varied ethnic backgrounds, represented the diverse culture of urban America at the turn of the century. Mixed in with the New Yorkers were some farm boys from Montana and Wyoming. The men learned to work together in spite of their differences when separated from other American and French forces for five days.

On September 26, 1918 the First Army ordered the 77<sup>th</sup> Division to advance through the Argonne Forest. Additional American troops, joined by the French, proceeded to drive north. The Germans had the advantage of holding important high ground and had caused many Allied casualties as a result. The Americans had plenty of spirit and courage; it was training and experience they lacked. Most reinforcements in the region were recent draftees. Some had never fired a gun or even seen a grenade and Maj. Charles White Whittlesey's unit was no different. In fact, Whittlesey was a Harvard trained attorney, practicing banking law in New York City before joining the army.<sup>[i]</sup>

Whittlesey's battalion advanced toward their objective until they began encountering severe German resistance.<sup>[ii]</sup> The Lost Battalion found itself in a wooded ravine, surrounded by hostile Germans by the evening of October 2.<sup>[iii]</sup>

The men dug into the side of a ravine just short of their objective and waited for reinforcements from the rear. Whittlesey and his men were in terrain that was defensible, but they faced harassment from all directions by German troops. Food rations were in short supply and soon the only available water would be from a muddy creek, closely guarded by German snipers and machine gun nests. Ammunition was also dwindling quickly.

Brig. Gen. Evan Johnston contacted Gen. Robert Alexander to alert him that Whittlesey's men were

in danger of becoming completely cut off. However, Alexander had received positive reports from other regions and assumed that there were Allies in the area to protect Whittlesey's flank.<sup>[iv]</sup> With the runner and phone systems down, Whittlesey turned to the few remaining carrier pigeons that remained. He sent three pigeons to headquarters with desperate messages regarding the perilous situation of his men and requested assistance from American artillery.

By nightfall on October 3, 25 percent of Whittlesey's force had become casualties.<sup>[v]</sup> They had no medical supplies and no one qualified to render aid. Despite this, Whittlesey and his men continued to hold their position, refusing to surrender or withdraw.

The soldiers of the Lost Battalion heard the sound of shells landing on the southern slope of the valley by mid-afternoon on October 4. Initially, the men's hopes soared as they thought the sounds were coming from American artillery attacking the Germans behind them. Whittlesey soon realized that American forces were actually hitting his men.<sup>[vi]</sup> He was forced to send his last pigeon with the message "Our artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us. For Heaven's Sake stop it."<sup>[vii]</sup>

On October 8, reinforcements finally reached the unit. Of the more than 600 men trapped in the ravine, only 190 were physically able to walk out of the woods, 190 were wounded, 110 were dead, and 60 missing.<sup>[viii]</sup> Yet it was ultimately the ravine that saved so many of them. The terrain provided the Lost Battalion with conditions necessary to defend itself in spite of being surrounded by German troops.

<sup>[i]</sup> Robert. J. Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion* (Wisconsin: American Expeditionary Foundation, 2007), 42.

<sup>[ii]</sup> Edward Lengel, *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918* (New York: Holt, 2007), 224.

<sup>[iii]</sup> American Battle Monuments Commission, *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe* (Washington, DC.: Center of Military History United States Army, 1995), 337.

<sup>[iv]</sup> Lengel, *To Conquer Hell*, 230.

<sup>[v]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[vi]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[vii]</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>[viii]</sup> James B. Legg, "Siege in the Argonne." *Legacy* 17, no. 1 (2013):15-15, 15.

# Lost Battalion Rubric

	Advanced	Proficient	Basic	Emerging
<b>Content and Development</b>	Presents a clear and central idea about the topic. Fully develops the central idea with specific, relevant details. Sustains focus on the central idea throughout the writing.	Presents a central idea about the topic. Develops the central idea, but details are general, or the elaboration may be inconsistent.	Central idea may be unclear. Details need elaboration to clarify the central idea. Focus may shift or be lost causing confusion for the reader.	There is no clear central idea. Details are sparse and confusing. There is no sense of focus.
<b>Organization</b>	Has an effective introduction, body, and conclusion. Provides a smooth progression of ideas by using appropriate transitional devices.	Has an introduction, body, and conclusion. Provides a logical progression of ideas.	Introduction, body, and conclusion may be ineffective. Provides a simplistic, repetitious, or random progression of ideas.	Introduction, body, or conclusion is absent. Presents information in random or illogical order.
<b>Voice</b>	Uses precise and/or vivid vocabulary appropriate for the topic. Phrasing is effective, not predictable or obvious. Varies sentence structure to promote continuity. Shows strong awareness of audience and task. Tone is consistent and appropriate.	Uses precise vocabulary appropriate for the topic. Phrasing is effective. Varies sentence structure to promote continuity. Shows awareness of audience and task. Tone is consistent and appropriate.	Uses both general and precise vocabulary. Phrasing may not be effective and may be predictable or obvious. Sentence structure varies little. Shows some awareness of audience and task. Tone may not be appropriate.	Uses simple vocabulary. Phrasing is repetitive or confusing. Shows little or no sentence variety. Shows little or no awareness of audience or task. Tone may be inappropriate.
<b>Conventions</b>	Provides evidence of a consistent and strong command of conventions.	Provides evidence of an adequate command of conventions.	Provides evidence of a limited command of conventions.	Provides little or no evidence of command of conventions.