Voiceover: This program is sponsored by The United States World War One Centennial Commission.
(Theme music)
Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.
(Applause)
Williams: Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* with author Edward Lengel discussing his book *Never in Finer Company: The Men of the Great War's Lost Battalion*. I'm your host Jay Williams, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. It's sponsored by the United States World War One Centennial Commission. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. The entrance of the United States into WWI in 1917 marked a key turning point in the conflict. For three long years the war had been locked in a stalemate as Germany and Allied forces dug in. The arrival of General John Pershing and his American Expeditionary Force on the continent bought an influx of fresh soldiers eager to make their mark on the world stage by demonstrating their bravery and determination in the face of danger. In October 1918, just weeks before the Great War ended at 11 a.m. on the 11th day of the 11th month, nearly 600 soldiers charged into the dense Argonne Forest to attack the German force ahead of them. When support from the French and American forces on their flanks was held up, the Americans found themselves cut off by the Germans and isolated from reinforcements. Seven days later only 194 soldiers from the original unit walked out of the forest. The stand of the army's lost battalion was an extraordinary display of heroism under fire. In *Never in Finer Company*, author Edward Lengel tells the broader story of the lost battalion through the narratives of four men: Major Charles Whittlesey, a lawyer eager to prove his mettle as the battalion's commander; Captain George McMurtry, a New York stockbroker and executive; Sergeant Alvin York, whose famous exploits helped rescue the battalion; and Damon Runyon, the soon-to-be-famous newspaper man who struggled to understand the events he witnessed. From the patriotic frenzy that sent the four young men over there, to their struggle to cope with the horror of the war, Lengel offers a story that is moving and dramatic on an epic scale. Edward G. Lengel has published books on WWI and the Revolutionary War including *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne 1918, The Epic Battle That Ended the First World War* and *First Entrepreneur: How George Washington Built His and the Nation's Prosperity*. He has written articles for Military History, Military History Quarterly, American Heritage, American History, History Now, and Humanities. Please join me in welcoming Edward Lengel to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.
(Applause)
Lengel: Good evening. I want particularly to thank the Pritzker Military Museum and Library for having me here. It is truly a great honor to be here, and also to thank the World War One Centennial Commission, on which I'm privileged to serve as a historical advisor. The commission has done wonderful work this year to bring consciousness of this war to the American people, something that I think has truly been lacking. "War makes rattling good history, but peace is poor reading." Those are the words of the author Thomas Hardy. Well, it really depends on the war. Shortly after I wrote my first book about WWI, I raised the idea with the publisher on writing another book on WWI, and I got the response, "WWI has poor entertainment value," which I think typifies the way the war has been understood or misunderstood by the American people up to this

year. Often I get the response when I discuss this war with people, even when I discuss it on radio shows or in talks or the rest, that you can pretty much boil down the war to one thing, and that's tragedy. And that's really all you need to know, and that's all you need to understand. There's a perception that it's one saga of unadulterated suffering and misery, that we can therefore generalize about the war, we can generalize about the participants, the events, and the outcomes, and that as a result there really isn't much to learn. It's a poison in our understanding of the war. And what it does is it takes away from the individual stories, the individual men and women. And it takes away from us our ability to understand that there are millions of individual accounts, experiences, and outcomes, each of which affected a soldier, a nurse, a civilian, a child, family member, a journalist, and affected their families, affected their communities, and affected our nation. It's something that I have come to learn in studying this war and being approached by descendants and relatives of veterans is that these individual stories and experiences continue to affect us today and our families. I've spoken to many descendants of veterans who have told me the things that their grandfather or great-grandfather brought home still have changed their lives today. But the important thing to remember is that we must get beyond this broad perception of simple tragedy and understand that this is a human experience. War is always a human experience. It reflects the things that are in each of us as human beings. It reflects the worst that people can do and that they can experience, and it also reflects at times the most exalted things of which we are capable. Certainly that includes things such as endurance in the face of immense suffering, but it also includes things such as comradeship, togetherness, and giving--the things that lift us up as well as the things that bear us down. That's been my focus on WWI from the very beginning. I've been interested in the people. I want to understand how individuals experience the unprecedented, the unknowable, the unfathomable, and what they do with it, where they take it. When we look at these stories, whether we've been in the service or we haven't been in the service, they can tell us something about ourselves. And they can tell us something about our present as well as our future. And so that's what I've tried to do with *Never in Finer Company* is to take the lives of four men who come from very different backgrounds to describe how those lives intersect in one moment which amounted to something like five, six days in the Argonne Forest in France in October of 1918, how their experiences represented the broader experiences of people of the United States at a very transitional time in our history, and then finally what they did with it. Each of them, just like all of the servicemen and women who entered into the First World War--each of them carried a different set of values based on their backgrounds, their ideas, their beliefs, their hopes, their dreams. Each of them had individual experiences, individual experiences in this war. And each of them took from it something different. Now, the feelings may have been common in some cases, like I'll be talking about this evening. Feelings such as guilt, feelings such as love for their comrades, feelings such as terrible memories, terrible experiences. And each of them processed it in a different way. Some of them struggled to process those feelings. Some of them, just like today as we're experiencing in the 21st century, are consumed by those experiences. But some of them find a way to turn those feelings and experiences into something else. It's something more positive, more hopeful. And so I do believe this is something that we can relate to today, whatever our backgrounds may be. April of 1917, New York City was at the epicenter of a country plunged into a world war that it had no means of understanding. We were utterly unprepared for this war. We had little understanding of what type of a war it was going to be. We had been deluding ourselves for some time that we would be able to stay out of the war, let the Europeans fight it out. We were certainly conscious of the scale of the fighting and of the bloodletting, particularly on the western front, but we didn't really understand how that was

happening. And New York City had, though, a very unique experience into the war in that this great city was in a transitional period of its history. We tend to look at New York City now with this mystique of the Big Apple. It's a city that is representative in some ways of people all around the world. When they think of America, they think of New York City. We don't have an issue with identifying, this is America. But in 1917 the feeling was very different. New York City was a city certainly of growth, of bombast, many qualities, but it was a city of change, and it was a city struggling to find its identity. For many Americans, including citizens of the city, were concerned that it was no longer American at the beginning of the 20th century, that something had happened to it, something had taken it away from its history as connected with the founding fathers and George Washington saying goodbye to his troops there at the end of the Revolutionary War. And now it had become a city of teeming slums, as we see here with the Lower East Side. Of strangers--millions of strangers who had entered into the country and were continuing to flow into the country through Ellis Island. These were people who had come from Europe, from places like Italy, Germany, Russia, Poland, the Balkans. Also from China, from Latin America, some even from Africa, and had given the city a different character. If you walked down, say, Mulberry Street, a ten-minute walk in the spring of 1917, you'd probably hear ten different languages spoken. And so when the city enters into the war there's this effort to be more patriotic, to be more committed to the cause, at least on the surface, than anywhere else. New Yorkers tried harder--Irving Berlin was actually writing songs at this time-- to show that they were patriotic, that they loved America. But it all rang hollow. Certainly rang hollow with the media. When draftees or volunteers assembled and paraded, the media often remarked on how apathetic they seemed, how nobody seemed to come out to cheer them except little girls. Said even the little boys weren't interested in being there. Everybody was concerned with something else. So they had to find elements that united them. This is a much later photo of Damon Runyon, one of my four men. Great New York City sports writer. Sports is one of the only things that united New York City at this time. It's a city crazy for sports, and Damon Runyon was a quintessential sports writer. Covered the World Series, games at the polo grounds, of great boxing events that took place. He was a biographer of the great Jack Dempsey, of Kentucky Derby, of horse racing that took place in the area. New Yorkers were crazy for sports, and they were looking for somebody who could tell those stories and bring them together. This is a picture of recruits in where I'm speaking right now, in Chicago, which also was facing many of the same concerns. How can you draw these people together? Certainly you can appeal to sports, you can appeal to patriotism, you can appeal to ideas. But ultimately these are people coming from so many different places, there's a deep concern that once you move them toward the front, once you put them in a position where they're going to fight, they're not going to be loyal. And in fact when the United States attempts on our first entry into the war in April 1917 to enlist an army on the voluntary principle, the response is pathetic. Over a period of a month we perhaps over the whole country get 40,000 recruits. You can't build an army that way. We immediately have to turn to a draft, which only increases the worries. These guys are being forced to enter into military service. Once you get them into the front, who's going to mold them together? Who's going to give them some kind of a common sense of principles and identity? Who's going to get them to fight? And this paranoia reaches the point that for many divisions including the 77th division which will be my focus this evening--New York's Metropolitan Division, or the 82nd All-American Division--also heavily recruited from immigrants--thousands of soldiers are kicked out from military service right before they're sent overseas for no other reason than that their origins were different. So where do we look for the glue that will pull these men together? We look to the Plattsburg movement. The Plattsburg movement is a fascinating movement, an

interesting idea in our time, partly an idea of Teddy Roosevelt, ex-president who really believed in preparedness. He and others in 1915/1916, before the United States enters the war, when many others were still hoping we'd never enter into the war, they developed this idea that what we need to do is bring the best and brightest young men of our country-- the blue bloods, the doctors, the lawyers, the sons of the great oligarchs, the sons of wealth, the people of privilege--and we need to create in them an idea that they need to be prepared. We'll bring them into camps--the first one was at Plattsburg, New York, thus the name of the movement, but it spread all over the country--we'll bring them into camps where they train to become athletic, physically prepared. They'll learn the basics of tactics, of military training, but most of all we will train them in a sense of duty and responsibility. Civic duty. Those to whom much is given, much will be asked. You've been given a lot; you need to give something back. And as these men go in the summers of 1915, 1916, and then into 1917, that idea is drilled into their heads and into the heads of men like these. Charles Whittlesey, the young man with glasses, looks like and is an intellectual. A very sensitive young man, a very successful lawyer from Wisconsin by way of Pittsfield, Massachusetts who goes to Harvard Law School. Williams College, and then Harvard Law School, and then sets up practice on Manhattan. Very successful, brilliant young man. A deep thinking young man--becomes a socialist at this time. A socialist in kind of a broad sense rather than a doctrinaire sense in that he's interested in people, and how do we solve the problem of people who suffer, and how do we lift them up. Charles Whittlesey goes to the Plattsburg camp and soaks into the very marrow of his bones the idea of responsibility, of duty and responsibility to others. George McMurtry, a very formidable looking gentleman. In his forties when the war begins. A veteran of the Spanish American War, he had been one of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders. At this time he has no need to go off to fight. He's a millionaire stockbroker. Irish American heritage. His father was an immigrant who owned coalmines in western Pennsylvania. He too goes to Harvard. He too experiences privilege, and he too goes to Plattsburg and soaks in the idea of duty and responsibility. And in the autumn of 1917 these two men are assigned with many others like them to become officers in the 77th division, which is made up almost entirely of draftees from greater New York City, large numbers of them from the Lower East Side, from Brooklyn, from the Bronx, just like the 33rd division, for example, was recruited heavily out of Chicago. These are guys who men like Whittlesey and McMurtry have to command who have nothing in common with them. Others come from upstate New York and in other places. When the division moves into the lines in France, the Germans report that an Italian division has moved into the lines, because all the guys are talking to each other in Italian. Lots of them aren't even naturalized, but they're immigrants or sons of immigrants. A very whacky assemblage of people. But McMurtry and Whittlesey with total dedication work to train these men. And the men are embraced by New York City. They go to train at Camp Upton on Long Island, mosquito infested swamp. But they're cordoned off from New York City as there's this fear that they're gonna run off to New York and get involved in stuff there and not keep to their duty, but eventually it's recognized that if the city embraces them and makes it into its own, maybe they can acquire some specific identity, some specific feeling. They go to the Hippodrome, and they're actually put on show there in early 1918 just as their training is finished to demonstrate to thousands of spectators, civilians, what war is going to be like. They have no idea what war is going to be like. They put on shows of what trench warfare and a trench raid is going to be like, and I kid you not, they actually--some of them dress up as trees and scuttle across no man's land in order to break into the German trenches. It's all a show, but it's a way of giving them a sense of common identity. Other's meanwhile are entering the armed forces from all over the country, in very different

places from New York City. This is a picture--again a later picture as you can see from the automobile in the background--of Fentress County, Tennessee, way up in northeast Tennessee, up in the mountains, the upper Cumberland along the Kentucky border. This is where my people come from, and my third cousin Alvin C. York was born. It's a country that is isolated from the rest of the United States. It has to deal with perceptions and prejudices, in some ways similar to what New York City immigrants have to deal with. They're all called hillbillies, ignorant backwoodsmen. Very little to do with the people of the lowlands. They're a people of--who love storytelling, who love good food, people of great religious conviction and faith, but also a people who understand violence, perhaps better than just about anybody else in the country. These are people who are descended from Scots-Irish clansmen where feuds and vendetta are often the order of the day. And Alvin York grows up in this environment. He grows up as a young man who's in poverty, drinks too much, gets into fights. It's said that he may have killed a man in a bar fight. Experiences, like many other people from this country, a religious conversion and has to debate within himself--now, he's just converted to a very bible-believing form of Christianity--whether God is willing to let him go off and to fight and to kill other men. He goes through a great deal of torment and anguish about this. Debates with his officers before he finally decides that, yes, this is something I can do. But as we talk about York you need to keep in mind, like everybody else, he's not a caricature. I like the movie-- beautiful movie, but still a movie with Gary Cooper, 1941, *Sergeant York*. He's not a cardboard cutout. He's a conflicted man with a history of poverty and violence who's trying to find the way to do good and now is going to be thrown into a crucible like millions of other young men, many woman, from different backgrounds who at a very formative time in their life, when they're just trying to decide who they are, are sent to the front. And so an army is formed, the American Expeditionary Forces are sent overseas in increasingly huge numbers in the spring of 1918. I don't have the time to describe all the details, but suffice to say they're utterly unprepared. They've learned in training stateside to fire their rifles, not much else. Most of the equipment that they have is manufactured in France and Britain. And they're commanded by this gentleman in the front with the mustache and the cap, General John J. Pershing. And Pershing's idea, very briefly stated, is that we Americans are gonna bring a new way of warfare to the western front. The Europeans have been fighting in trenches with heavy artillery, poison gas, machine guns. We're not going to fight that way. We're going to emphasize the individual American soldier with his rifle and his bayonet fighting in a specially American way, who will decide not to sit in a trench but will attack and will return open warfare to the front. This is the key word: attack, attack, attack. It's something that he drills into his officers, just like men like Charles Whittlesey and George McMurtry have been taught. Duty, responsibly, dedication. You must attack. It creates a conflict, as you can imagine, in their minds. Pershing is a man of great merit as a general and as an officer who's trying to find a way to break the deadlock. And like others he simply doesn't understand what he's about to face and what his men are about to face. I'm not going to point out the details on this map, but roughly from May through September, early September of 1918, American troops are progressively moved closer and closer to the front. The first major battle takes place in Belleau Wood in the beginning of June 1918 where the United States Marines fight with incredible bravery and take incredible loses, and the United States Army also plays an important role. And it follows with battles through the Marne River defense mid-July, the Battle of Soissons July 18th, 1st and 2nd divisions assaulting and then continued experiences of combat through the summer. And then on September 26, 1918 the United States launches what remains to this day its largest and bloodiest battle and the largest defensive in its history. Over one million men are pulled into this battle, which will ultimately last from September 26th to November 11th, but

almost all the fighting takes place in those first three weeks, from the 26th to about October 15th/16th when we crack the central German defensive position of the Kriemhilde Stellung. In those three weeks about 26,000 young men are killed in action, in three weeks. About 100,000 additional casualties above and beyond that, and incidentally I think that's a far understatement. One of the characteristics of the United States in this war is certainly true for my relatives who were in the war--they had very little understanding in particular of poison gas and how to wear their masks properly. Many, many thousands of Americans got what they called a whiff of gas. They did not report as casualties, but their lungs were damaged and ultimately ruined, and like my great uncle with the 42nd Rainbow Division, came home--a very hail and hearty man before the war, and came home, and his lungs were ruined. And he died at the age of fifty. There were many, many others like that who were never reported as casualties. United States assaults with nine divisions toward an important German held railway junction. The details don't matter for the purposes of this story. Suffice to say they make good progress on the first day and then over the second and the third days as German reinforcements rush in the assault begins to bog down, and it becomes a slogging match. Most of these divisions are green. Never experienced fighting before. The 77th division must assault on the left flank of the offensive into the Argonne Forest, which is a dense, forbidding forest choked with undergrowth, which the Germans have been holding in force or many years. They've deeply entrenched it-- pillboxes, bunkers, interlocking fields of fire, machine gun nests, well-sighted artillery, poison gas, all the rest. And the Germans are determined to defend this forest. The 77th division is the first all-draftee division to be moved to the front. It has experience some fighting before this and acquitted itself well, but nothing like what it experienced in the Argonne Forest. These men are ordered to assault again and again the forest frontally. They do not tremble. They do not hold back. They keep attacking day after day with great dedication and bravery. And Charles Whittlesey takes to his heart again all of those ideas, but particularly at this point General Pershing's prescript as well as all of Pershing's other officers, including the corps commander, the divisional commander, the brigade commander, the regimental commander--attack. Do not pay any attention to your flanks. Rely upon it that you will be supported simply because we tell you you will be supported, and move forward. Into the woods, take your objective. This is the root cause of why Charles Whittlesey's force, comprised of portions of two battalions, infantry battalions plus a machine gun unit of the 308th infantry regiment, enter into what is called the pocket on October 2, 1918. Whittlesey has been ordered to attack. The attacks have bogged down at multiple points. He and other officers protest to the colonel, who has already protested to the brigadier general, who has already protested to the major general. And each of them has been told, and must tell Whittlesey in turn, "We're not interested in your excuses. Attack. You will be supported on the flanks." By chance the Germans on this day, October 2nd, have left a gap in the lines. Whittlesey by chance advances through that gap, can't understand why he and the 2nd battalion under George McMurtry do not experience major German resistance. They cannot see support on either the right or the left, but they've been told no to pay attention. Keep going. And so they enter the woods, they pass through a ravine, they move up a slope which is very steep—I've been there--on which there is a road. They dig in right below a road, and the slope only gets steeper above that. And they dig in. It's their objective. Establish a perimeter. And they dig in, and the night settles down, and overnight the Germans seal the gap, surround the pocket, and begin the assault. Over the next five days from about October 2nd to October 7, 1918, approximately 600 men of these combined battalions, under the command of Whittlesey, McMurtry, and other officers such as Captain Nelson Holderman of California must hold on. They have no food. They have no medical

supplies. The water that they can get must come from a spring at the base of the slope on which they're dug in. Troops must go down there and try to make their way to the spring and get some water. The problem is it's under observation by German snipers. At one point they come under bombardment from their own artillery. The only means of communication with the rear are pigeons. And they have one pigeon left in their coop, a pigeon named Cher Ami. The handler of this pigeon is a French Canadian. He's named all of his birds. He loves his birds. Charles Whittlesey with a shaking hand--and this message still exists. It's owned by the family, by Whittlesey's family--says, "We're being shelled by our own artillery. For God's sake, stop." Ties it to the pigeon's leg, and pigeon is hurled into the air and immediately roosts in a nearby branch. The pigeon handler has to run down under fire, shimmy up the tree trunk, and shake the branch. The pigeon still is preening its feather, and the soldiers are throwing rocks and sticks at it. Finally it takes off, Cher Ami flutters off and is hit by artillery. They see this happen, by shrapnel, and veers off and plunges to the ground. The pigeon actually eventually makes it back minus one leg, which is not the leg on which the message is written, minus one eye, with shrapnel in its body. Carries the message back to headquarters. Now we don't know that that's why the artillery stopped. In fact likely the artillery stopped because they realized--and this was not Whittlesey's fault--he gave them the right coordinates. Somebody else messed up. They finally realized what they were doing, and they stopped. But that of course isn't the end of the struggle. The Germans attack with flamethrowers, grenades, and the men hold out. These are again the same men. These are the men I was describing. Coming from the slums of New York. This unit is about twenty-five percent Jewish. There are also Catholics, Protestants, atheists. There are men from Italy, from Russia. There are men from upstate New York. There are men who have been pushed in as replacements at the last second who are ranchers and farmers from the mountain West. The army had a tendency to do this. They would merge units even if they came from completely different backgrounds. And what they have, the one thing--well, two things they have. The first that they have is each other. They depend utterly and entirely on each other. From absolutely different backgrounds, they come to recognize that their survival depends on the man next to them, guys who didn't talk to each other before this. Guys who kind of like, "I don't know. You don't have anything to do with me. What am I gonna say to you? You come from Wyoming. Where's Wyoming?" The guy from Wyoming is like, "You're from what? You're from Poland? Where's Poland?" They come to depend on each other, and they come to depend on Charles Whittlesey and George McMurtry and Captain Cullen who is shown here with Charles Whittlesey. Whittlesey does not sleep during this entire time in the pocket. I could not find a record of him sleeping. Instead he goes each night from hole to hole, from soldier to soldier, talks to each one of them. Tries to find some words in his fumbling way to encourage them to hold on, to give everything that he has for them. George McMurtry is wounded in multiple places. At one point he has a big wooden handle sticking out of his back, and Whittlesey says, "What's that?" and pulls it out. And McMurtry screams at him and says, "I didn't even know that was there." It's the handle of a German potato masher grenade in his back. Captain Nelson Holderman, hit in multiple places. These men show incredible dedication to their troops and great compassion for their troops to hold on, and it's their example as well as their togetherness that pulls them out. It's an incredible story. So where does Alvin York come in? Alvin York is assigned to the 82nd All-American Division, which hasn't seen combat up to this point. General Hunter Liggett sees an opportunity to attack into the German flank in the eastern Argonne Forest using the 82nd division and the 28th division as well, the Pennsylvania National Guard. This flanking attack was what will ultimately force the Germans to withdraw. And at the climax of this assault on October 8, 1918, Alvin York walks toward his own destiny in the

Argonne Forest, just about a mile away from where the lost battalion was fighting. And in his action, he with some other men from his company captures a group of Germans in the forest. They're able also to get behind the German lines. Well, there's a German machine gunner up on a ridge, machine gun crew up on a ridge, who see this taking place, and without discrimination between fellow Germans, fires into them, and York climbs up, shoots into the Germans, probably kills about twenty of them. They attempt to take him out. And he capture with the help of his comrades 132 men. This action helped to save the lost battalion. The lost battalion is assembled. There are about 194 men left who can walk out of the original 600. They walk out of the Argonne Forest, and who should be there to meet them but Damon Runyon, the great New York City sports writer who is heartily sick of covering baseball and boxing when there's a war on and begs William Randolph Hearst to let him go off and fight and see the fighting. Damon Runyon has a different attitude toward war reporting from his fellow writers. He doesn't go to the press pool and hang around there. He doesn't just go and talk to Pershing, even though Hearst has told him to make Pershing a hero. He wants to be there to talk to the guys. He wants to hear their stories, and he listens to their stories, the men of the lost battalion as they walk out of the forest. And he learns about what they did, and he takes it back to America and reports the story to the rest of the country and tells them that these are all Americans. Whatever you may have had in doubts where they came from, these are all Americans, and they shared a common story that is our story. And so while he's telling this story, the men have to return home who were there. Men like George McMurtry. This is a picture of him on his ship returning home. And I just say, look into his eyes, and you can see what he experienced. Men like Charles Whittlesey, and again you can look into his eyes and see what he experienced. Whittlesey and McMurtry are forced in 1919, imagine this, to return to the scene of combat and to reenact for a movie, a popular movie, what they had experienced there. And Alvin York returns home, too. All of them are treated as celebrities. All of them are lionized. All of them are told how wonderful they are, York in particular, and again all you have to do is look into his eyes. York is plagued. He's not saying, "Look what a hero I am." He's plagued by guilt. Whittlesey is plagued by guilt for each man he left behind. McMurtry is plagued by guilt. And so these three come together November of 1921 at the interment of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington Cemetery. And Whittlesey and McMurtry and York have all been asked to be honorary pallbearers, and while they're watching the ceremony Whittlesey turns to McMurtry, who has become his best friend, and he says, "George, I should never have come. I cannot help but think that maybe one of my men, and I shall not sleep tonight. I shall hear their cries." And a short time later Whittlesey goes to see this movie in which he's been forced to act. And the next morning he boards a steamer bound for Cuba. And halfway across he steps overboard. He's received the Medal of Honor. George McMurtry's received the Medal of Honor. Alvin York's received the Medal of Honor. They've been told what they did--Whittlesey's men came to him after the war and continued to ask him for help, continued to ask him for support, but he can't get over his feelings that he let them down, and he can't handle it. George McMurtry for his part dedicates himself to the Lost Battalion Survivors Association, and each year as these survivors meet, he lifts a glass in a toast, and he calls back to the words that Charles Whittlesey said as they marched out of the pocket on October 8, 1918, and he says, "Gentlemen, we shall never be in finer company than we are today." And the men stick to each other. They help each other through the Association. Alvin York returns home. He finds a way to take his celebrity--not the money, but to funnel all of the money that he receives, all the celebrity he receives, into helping the less fortunate, the poor of east Tennessee through the Alvin York Foundation. And in giving to others, York is able to find peace. He's able of these three soldiers more than the others to return home by

passionately dedicating himself and everything he gets to helping the less fortunate. And finally Damon Runyon, the magnificent Damon Runyon of *Guys and Dolls*. He goes back to his womanizing. He goes back to his chain-smoking. He goes back to his reporting in the streets of New York City. And he writes *Guys and Dolls* and chronicles the Great White Way. But the stories he tells are the stories of everyday Americans, including those who have been through the war. And the slang he uses in these stories is developed from things that he learned at the front. He has brought it all together, and in this final act, his final gesture in his will--he dies in 1946 of throat cancer--he somehow brings the story all together, and that's why I included him in my story. He wills that Eddie Rickenbacker, the great WWI ace, will fly a plane over Manhattan, and Damon Runyon's son will tip his ashes over Times Square, merging the war, the city that he said he loved so well, into one common story of America. And that is the story of the men of the lost battalion, of *Never in Finer Company.* Thank you.
(Applause)
1: How is it despite all this heroism and knowledge and coverage in the American press that the longevity of the war was cut so short and not acknowledged by the average citizen? I, for instance, I've known very little about it until the goings-on this year in Chicago.
Lengel: That's a very important question. And it's a question I've been asking myself for some time. Others have asked me. And I suspect it goes back to the war itself. I read once when I was doing research for my book *To Conquer Hell* a testimony of a veteran who came home. And you know, the stories that were told are often, well, they didn't want to talk about it. When they came home they didn't want to talk about what they experienced, and that's often true. But this one veteran said, "We actually--many of us did want to talk about it. But what happened when we tried to talk about it is our family, our friends and other people who hadn't been there would shut us up. And they'd shut us up with things like, 'That's just too terrible to think about. Why don't we talk about something else.'" And he compared it, he said, "It's like being told it's a joke that you've heard before." And he said, "Then once we got that, we didn't want to discuss it anymore." I think it gets back in some ways to what I was saying at the beginning, is that there was a perception right at the time that when they came home, certainly we celebrated them. There were parades, there were all the rest, and there were celebrities like Whittlesey and York and McMurtry. But after a little bit of all of that, when they finally came home we didn't want to talk about it anymore. The "we", the people who were at home, didn't want to hear about it anymore. We wanted to move on. And as time went on, we moved into the Roaring '20s and the Great Depression, this kind of common perception of WWI as just being a huge bloodbath that provided no lessons, that was only an endless tale of misery and woe kind of took hold. Then we have WWII, which seems on the surface to be a completely different type of conflict, one that we can truly celebrate, by the time we get to the fiftieth anniversary of WWI, we're right smack-dab in the middle of Vietnam. And all of these things I think conspired to make us forget it, but I think it's something about our own culture, and it's something specifically about WWI that we just don't want to talk about it, and that's a shame because these stories are compelling.
2: I have one final question from Fritz on Facebook. Who was the last surviving member of the lost battalion, and did they continue to meet regularly?
Lengel: Great question. The--I'm not sure of the actual name of the last surviving member. I do know there was a gentleman named Lieutenant Maurice Revnes who actually had proposed surrender while they were in the pocket, and Whittlesey denied that, who didn't die until the '70s. He actually went off to Hollywood and got involved in the film industry. George McMurtry and Alvin York both died in the '50s. The Lost

Battalion Survivors Association continued to meet as I recall into the early 1960s, McMurtry chairing over those meetings until the time of his own death. It remained a pretty powerful and going concern up to about fifty years after the end of the war, and it's certainly I think a great example for veterans. It's one of the first organizations of its kind.
(Applause)
Williams: Thank you to Edward Lengel for an outstanding discussion and to the United States World War One Centennial Commission for sponsoring this program. The book is *Never in Finer Company: The Men of the Great War's Lost Battalion*, published by Da Capo Press. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit us in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.
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(Theme music)
Voiceover: The preceding program was produced by the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.