

# Valley of the Shadow

On October 6, 1918, two young airmen faced almost certain disaster in their final attempt to save the Lost Battalion.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

AS THE last page of 1917's blood-stained calendar was torn from the wall, the German General Staff became immersed in planning for a massive spring offensive. The Allies had to be defeated, or at the least forced to accept a negotiated settlement, before slowly mobilizing American manpower and industry could reinforce the staggering British and French armies on the Western Front.

Everything looked favorable to Gen. Erich Ludendorff, the dominant member of Germany's Supreme Command. Allied morale, particularly in France, was faltering after the costly and near-disastrous campaigns of 1917. The Russians had dropped out of the war a few months after the March revolution, enabling Ludendorff to move nearly eighty divisions to the Western Front, where, for the first time, Germany was superior to the Allies in both manpower and materiel.

A series of gigantic offensives, begun in March 1918, drove to within thirty-seven miles of Paris before the overextended German armies ground to a halt and an Allied counteroffensive could be launched in July. By mid-September, Gen. John J. Pershing had forty-two American divisions, each twice the size of other Allied divisions, on the line in the Meuse-Argonne sector, some fifty miles east of Reims. There were about 600 planes in American squadrons augmented by 200 Allied aircraft, operating under the control of Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell in support of Pershing's First Army offensive that kicked off on September 26.

Several American bombardment and observation squadrons were

equipped with British-designed DH-4s, the only American-manufactured aircraft to reach the front lines during the war. The 50th Observation Squadron was one of those flying the often-maligned DH-4 "Flaming Coffin," which, in truth, was no more vulnerable to fire than any other combat plane of that time.

On October 2, Pershing ordered his 77th Division to drive into the Argonne Forest. The 1st and 2d Battalions of the 308th Infantry, their left flank uncovered, soon were cut off and surrounded by strong German forces in a ravine deep within the Argonne. Known to history as *the Lost Battalion*, the units, commanded by Maj. Charles Whittlesey and Capt. George McMurtry, were soon out of food and medical supplies. Half their troops were dead or wounded, and they were running out of ammunition to repel continuous German attacks on the seventy-five-by-350-yard pocket. It was to be six days of horrible suffering before American forces could break through to their rescue.

On October 5, the 77th Division commander called on Capt. Daniel Morse's 50th Squadron to succor the beleaguered defenders who were being cut to shreds by machine-gun fire from the heights surrounding the ravine and by gre-



Lt. Harold E. Goettler (above) and his observer-gunner were World War I recipients of the Medal of Honor.

nades, flame throwers, and even misdirected rounds of friendly artillery. The squadron responded in what is believed to be the first sustained attempt at aerial resupply of a ground unit.

Flying through fog and rain, pilots of the 50th pinpointed the surrounded men. Intense ground fire downed three DH-4s, which crashed near Allied lines—none of them afire—with one dead and two wounded crewmen. On the morning of the sixth, a DH-4 flown by Lt. Harold E. Goettler with 2d Lt. Erwin R. Bleckley as observer-gunner tried again, unsuccessfully, to drop food and ammunition into the ravine. After their battle-damaged plane had been patched up, they returned to the forest late in the afternoon, hoping to come in at 1,000 feet. Clouds and fog forced them into low-level runs through a barrage of enemy fire. Finally, determined to get their small load of supplies to the desperate infantrymen, Goettler dove into the ravine at tree-top height with enemy machine guns firing down at the plane from cliffs along the ravine. Both men were fatally wounded, but Goettler managed to fly the battered DH-4 to a crash landing near French lines.

Harold Goettler and Erwin Bleckley, both awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously, were among four American airmen of World War I to be so honored. The other two were Lt. Frank Luke (posthumously) and Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker. Three officers of the Lost Battalion(s)—Major Whittlesey, Captain McMurtry, and Capt. Nelson Holderman—were also among some 100 World War I heroes to win the nation's highest decoration for valor.

The story of the Lost Battalion, though no more than a page in the long history of World War I, is the stuff of which legends are made. Two very young and courageous airmen who are forever a part of the Air Force heritage played a seldom-recalled part in that heroic action. ■