

FREDERICK EARL WHITEHAIR

1890 – 1956, WORLD WAR I
U.S. ARMY, PRIVATE FIRST CLASS

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In the late 1800s and early 1900s, demand for coal and timber gave rise to an industrial boom in West Virginia. As mining communities sprang up across the state, job opportunities attracted immigrants from Europe searching for a better life. In the small mountain communities and coal camps, diverse cultures and nationalities mixed together. The town of Flemington, Taylor County, built from whole cloth by the Pittsvein Mine Corporation in 1905, originated in such a way.

Frederick Earl Whitehair of Flemington eventually became one such miner working alongside men from Poland, Russia, and other European nations to extract coal from the earth. The U.S. Army would later have use for men like Frederick on the battlefields of World War I.

Whitehair was born on July 28, 1890, in Elk Garden, Mineral County, West Virginia, to Rena Whitehair (née Windon), a homemaker, and James Whitehair, a coal miner. Rena lived in Keyser with her parents at the time of her marriage in 1887. When her four children were eventually born, Frederick was the only son.

Tragically, illness claimed Rena's life very early: she died from consumption (tuberculosis) on November 3, 1898, when Frederick was only eight years old. Tuberculosis killed 1,000 West Virginians annually at the time, a problem so rampant that the state established Hopemont Sanitarium in Preston County in 1911.

The Whitehairs most likely relocated to Flemington after Rena's death. James Whitehair's mother Louisa was there, and her home was the headquarters of the Whitehair family. Three of young Frederick's aunts and uncles also lived there, making for a crowded house. Four of the house's residents, including Frederick's father, two uncles, and a boarder worked as coal miners.

While their father mined coal, Frederick Whitehair and his siblings attended school. Only Frederick made it through his sophomore year of high school. By 1910, the household decreased in size and only Frederick's immediate family lived with Louisa at her Flemington home. James and 19-year-old Frederick now supported the family with their mining wages. The young man remained in the Whitehair family home until he departed for the war in 1918.

World War I broke out in Europe in 1914. While the United States initially remained neutral, events forced President Woodrow Wilson's hand in May 1917, and America threw in with the cause of the Allies—principally Great Britain and France. As the nation realized it did not have the resources gathered for a modern war, Congress passed the Selective Service Act on May 18, 1917 to help answer President Woodrow Wilson's call to arms. Men across the United States had to appear before their local draft boards and register for potential military service.

In 1917, Whitehair filled out his draft card and



LEFT: Flemington High School, circa 1908.

BELOW: Flemington High baseball team, 1914.

West Virginia & Regional History Center, WVU Libraries



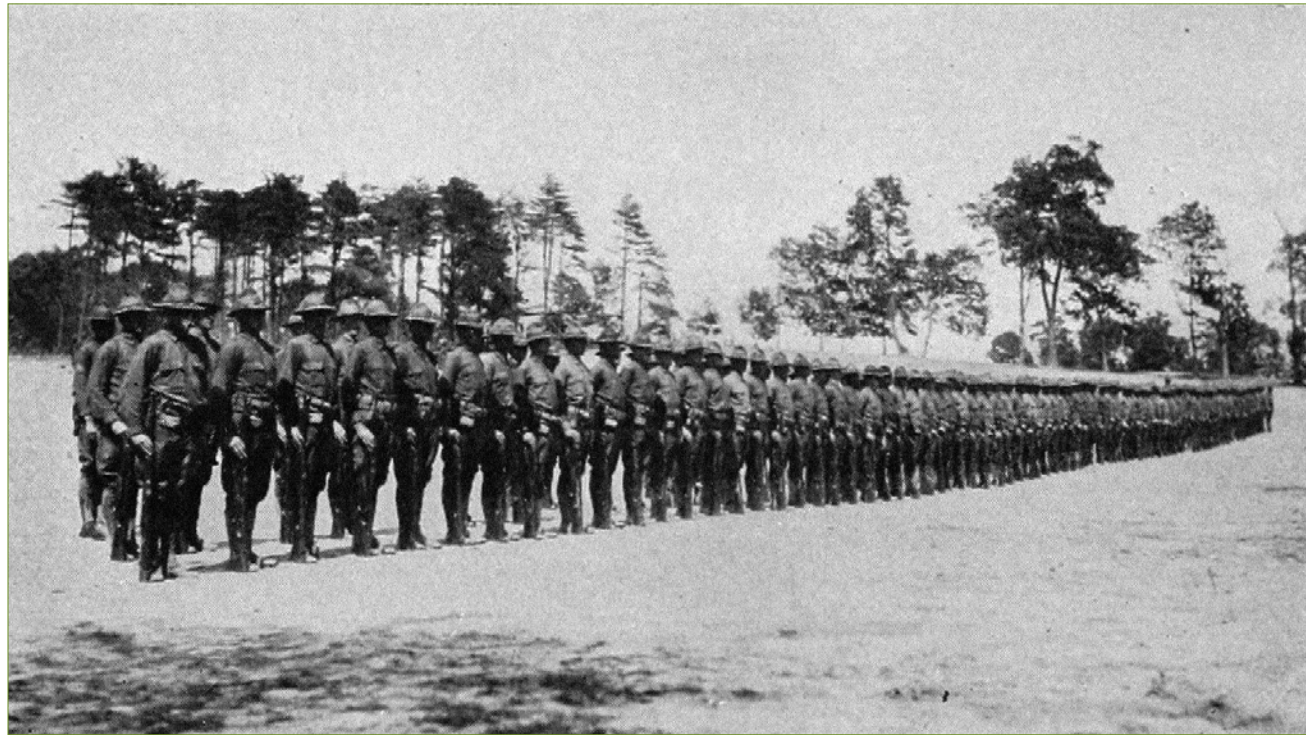
listed Pittsvein Coal as his employer. In February 1918, Frederick, along with several other Pittsvein employees, was accepted into the Army. Frederick was assigned to Company E, 2nd Battalion of the 27th Engineer Regiment.

It seems likely that Whitehair and his comrades knew exactly the regiment with which they would be enlisting. At the end of October 1917, the officers of the 27th posted a notice in the *Engineering and Mining Journal* advertising their search for men of Whitehair's cloth:

The Engineer Corps of the United States Army has been authorized to raise by voluntary enlistment a special mining regiment to consist of six companies of 250 men each and to be known as the 27th Engineers, National Army. The regiment is now being recruited. The first company has been formed and is in training at Camp Meade, Md. This regiment is to be made up entirely of picked men from the various mining sections of the country. All trades and occupations in and around a mine will be represented and each company will have a sufficient number of men skilled in each trade to enable it to operate as a unit.

The commanding officer will be a regular-army engineer officer, the remaining officers of the regiment being largely drawn from the mining engineers who have volunteered their services and who have been given the necessary military training at the officers' training camps. The 27th Engineers offers a great opportunity for the miners of this country to show their skill and courage. Any experienced mining man who wants first-line service in France is urged to enlist at once.

Such engineering units were essential, especially in the trenches of the Western Front. So elaborate and extensive had the trench warfare of World War I become that experienced miners could be useful on every battlefield, or behind the lines preparing roads, bridges, fortifications, depots, or airfields.



The 27th Engineers' original companies began training at Camp Meade in Maryland on December 20, 1917. In addition to employing their mining experience, the regiment trained for bridge building and repair, construction of fortifications, and demolition. Such an array of specializations was needed that the 27th accepted volunteers from Alaska, California, Montana, Colorado, Arizona, Kansas, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere—not to mention immigrants from Russia, Poland, and Italy.

Frederick Whitehair's Company E formed on July 16, 1918, and later that year the newly recruited soldiers went to Camp Meade to hone their skills. The men also spent a week at the Naval Rifle Range in Glenburnie, Maryland, where they were taught to handle a gun. Companies D and E evidently racked up the "highest shooting score ever recorded there" up to that time.

From Camp Meade, Company E and the Second Battalion moved to Camp Merrit, New Jersey, where they received military haircuts and prepared to ship out to Europe. On September 1, 1918, Whitehair departed from New York on HMHS

Nevasa, bound for Glasgow, Scotland. The Red Cross delivered sandwiches and ice cream to the troops as they boarded the chartered Cunard passenger liner-turned-troopship.

The 802nd Pioneer Infantry was also aboard, so sleeping accommodations were cramped with little room for the hammocks provided. They had small amounts of food and the 27th Engineers stated that "what the British tommies were fed it was no wonder they fought as they did as that 'grub' would make anyone fighting mad." The unit paused only briefly in Ireland and Scotland, but the 27th evidently enjoyed their quick moments of sightseeing. Every day they held drill on the ship, which was almost impossible to perform due to the very limited space.

On September 14, the battalion arrived via train from Glasgow to Romsey, England, where they slept under canvas before marching 14 miles to the Southampton Docks. There, a channel steamer named "Mona's Queen" carried Companies D and E to Le Havre, France.

Mere days after Frederick and his regiment arrived, the great Meuse-Argonne Offensive began.

LEFT: Whitehair's 2nd Battalion, 27th Engineers at Camp Meade, MD.

RIGHT: Army engineers working on a railroad in France during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.

Library of Congress

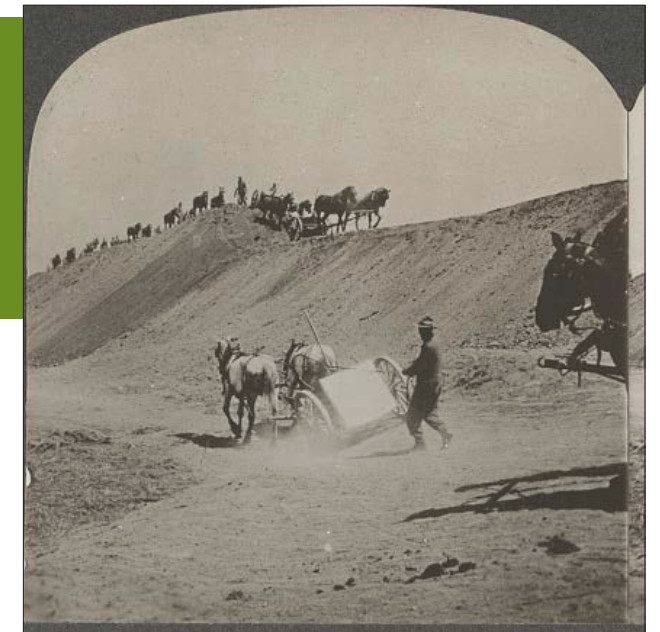
Though the different companies of the 27th Engineers had been briefly scattered in France, they were reunited to participate in the offensive, which became the final major operation of the war. The 2nd Battalion moved out on October 22 to Clermont, where nightly air raids further blasted a town already ruined after years of fighting. By the end of October, Whitehair and Company E were assigned to the Bridge Section.

As they passed through the devastated French countryside, the 27th were probably grateful the nature of their service usually kept them away from the worst fighting. The Meuse-Argonne Offensive lasted 47 days and cost 26,000 Americans their lives.

Whitehair does not appear to have had many opportunities to exercise his mining experience. Bridges and roads were in higher demand for construction or repair. On October 27, Company E moved to Camp Thibaudette near Les Islettes. From here, Frederick and his company marched 12 miles to Varennes. The men later referred to this trek as the "mud waltz" as they struggled to walk single-file through thick mud, trying to keep out of the way of ambulances, tanks, and gun fire.

Once in Varennes, Company E filled shell holes and widened the road to Apremont, then set off to repair bridges in Grandpre. The men reported daily air raids, and sightings of "many spectacular air battles." Some engineers picked up and saved German propaganda circulars that rained down from the sky.

When the group arrived at the Aire River in early November, the varied talents of Company E



became apparent. With timbermen, stone masons, skilled carpenters, and mechanics on hand, they built a five-span bridge and a two-span bridge over the Aire, as well as repaired other roads and bridges in the vicinity. The men cleaned out some of Grandpre's destroyed buildings to create livable quarters and a bathhouse.

During the period they spent repairing bridges, the war reached its conclusion. The Armistice was signed on November 11, but the men continued repair work until receiving their final orders. On December 7, Company E left for Le Catelier where, for the first time since the formation of the 27th, the entire regiment came together.

Before sailing home, Company E spent a month in Vertou, France. Frederick and his fellow soldiers filled their time by visiting with locals and exploring the area. Finally, on March 7, 1919, Company E arrived back home on the SS *Dakotan* (ID-3882), thus concluding Whitehair's short but busy stay in France.

Upon arriving back in Hoboken, New Jersey, the regiment disbanded. Frederick returned home to his family in Flemington. On November 17, 1928, he married Ilian "Lena" Kelly, a Taylor County resident 17 years his junior. Lena also came from a Taylor County mining family, and together the couple welcomed four children: James, David.



Juanita, and Delores. Frederick’s father, James Whitehair, died of typhoid fever following the birth of his namesake James.

The next two decades seem to have passed quietly for the Whitehairs, despite the onset of the Great Depression. In the 1950s, the family moved onto a farm in Taylor County’s Booths Creek area. In 1956, Frederick Whitehair passed away from a heart condition at 65 years of age, surrounded by family at the Grafton City Hospital. He was buried in Grafton National Cemetery on May 21, 1956.

Though the efforts of the 27th Engineers made it into few of the history books, the miners’ regiment was proud of its contributions to the war effort, as illustrated in a poem from their published history. A verse from the poem, “Cousin Jack Speaks for the 27th Engineers,” lilt:

“Then the war, with its fright and its ‘orrors
Come along. An’ they sent out their call
For miners. There’s no doubt about it
They was needed – we h’answered – that’s all.”



PLACE OF INTERMENT:
Grafton National Cemetery
SECTION F
SITE 1374



ABOVE: Flemington miners circa 1920s, after Whitehair returned home. *West Virginia & Regional History Center, WVU Libraries*

LEFT: The 27th Engineers return to the United States aboard SS *Dakotan*. *Library of Congress*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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As home to one of the nation’s first national cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America’s veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year’s parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

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For readability, bibliographies have been omitted from this publication. Student research for these biographies relies heavily on primary sources—census records, city directories, draft cards, muster rolls, and more—made available digitally through Ancestry and Fold3. Yearbook repositories and the digitized collections of many universities and archives have been invaluable resources. Most newspaper research was conducted digitally via Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchives, and the Library of Congress’s *Chronicling America* database.

Servicemembers’ Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs) and Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPFs) are another essential part of project research, provided free of charge in most cases by the National Archives through standard records requests.

As the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project has grown and matured, the team has found that new sources sometimes surface for veterans researched in prior project years. To better maintain a “living bibliography” of all its veterans, a single master document is kept up on the project’s webpage under the “Programs” tab at www.wvhumanities.org.

Views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Archives of the United States, or any other federal agency. For more information about the Veterans Legacy Memorial and the Veterans Legacy Grant Program, visit www.vlm cem.va.gov.

