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The Combat in France of the U.S. 360th Infantry Regiment and the Death of First Lieutenant George P. Cole on November 2, 1918, in the Battle of Meuse-Argonne

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The Combat in France of the U. S. 360th Infantry Regiment and the Death of
First Lieutenant George P. Cole on November 2, 1918, in the Battle of the Meuse-Argonne

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
History

By

Ralston P. Cole

B.S., United States Naval Academy, 1962
B.S., Louisiana State University, 1971

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In Memoriam

This thesis was written in honor of my great uncle, George Peyton Cole. Because of the primary source data in the form of original private documents and correspondence in the possession of the author, I was able to trace his history before and during his service in World War I as a first lieutenant in the National Army of the United States, 1917-1918. Along with his friends at La Salle School who became active servicemen, George was presented a service flag for his patriotism. Just a few months later he would die in battle in France on November 2, 1918.

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Abstract

This thesis is an investigation that combines historical research into military records and genealogy in the examination of the brief military career and death in courageous circumstances of George Peyton Cole. It also considers the policies of the U. S. military as regards battlefield treatment of deaths, immediate burial and subsequent repatriation of the remains. The author draws upon family records, official government reports and the recollections of the friends and superiors of the deceased.

Keywords: World War I, genealogy, Meuse-Argonne, American Expeditionary Force, Hill 321

Introduction and Background

It is said often that timing is very important. Timing can make or break a business venture. Timing can cause one to be available to finding love at just the right time. Timing can explain victory or defeat in war. Timing can cause a soldier to lose his life or be standing next to his best friend when he loses his life. Timing is capricious.

George Peyton Cole fell victim to timing that put him in France in 1918. George was the brother of my grandfather Ralston Steele Cole. George was born in the town of Jackson, Hinds County, Mississippi on December 26, 1890. He grew up in his parents' home at 1561 Calhoun Street in uptown New Orleans. His parents were Helen Lonnegan Cole of Jackson, Mississippi, and Walter Steele Cole of Lexington, Mississippi. His siblings were Helen May Cole, Walter Ramsey Cole, and Ralston Steele Cole, who was born in 1987 and was my grandfather. George attended public school at La Salle School on Perrier Street, and he graduated from Boys' High School on Canal Street.

George first worked at Sugar-Molasses Syrups as an assistant foreman and blender of syrups and next became a car salesman at Penick Ford in New Orleans. He joined the Louisiana National Guard as an enlisted man, in which he served on the Texas border with Mexico. He enlisted in the Guard on June 23, 1916. He became a corporal on April 1, 1917, and was serving with a machine gun company when he was discharged from the Louisiana National Guard on August 5, 1917, at Camp Nicholls, Louisiana. He immediately joined the United States Army in order to attend 2nd Officer Candidate School at Camp Stanley in Leon Springs, Texas, a camp very near San Antonio. When he was commissioned on November 27, 1917, he became a first

lieutenant instead of a second lieutenant because of his military experience in the National Guard.¹

In May of 1917, President Woodrow Wilson called for a great army to be formed. George Peyton Cole joined the 360th Infantry Regiment, which was in the 90th Infantry Division, as a first lieutenant and platoon leader. The 90th Division had officially been founded at Camp Travis, Texas on August 25, 1917, when Major General Henry T. Allen assumed command. Colonel Casper H. Conrad, Jr. was the commander of the 360th Infantry Regiment. From its beginning, the division was fortunate to receive an assignment of regular army officers of the highest type. The place of the training and organization of the division was Camp Travis. The camp took its name from Lieutenant Colonel William Barrett Travis, defender of the Alamo, and was one of the sixteen National Army cantonments erected simultaneously in different parts of the United States. The two states of Texas and Oklahoma furnished the men who composed the original division, although men of every state in the union later came to be represented in its ranks. The division insignia was a monogram “T-O,” adopted in France, to honor the states of Texas and Oklahoma.

First Lieutenant George Peyton Cole in American Expeditionary Forces

First Lieutenant George Peyton Cole was assigned as a platoon leader in the 360th Infantry Regiment. The 360th Infantry Regiment, the 345th Machine Gun Battalion, and the 359th Infantry Regiment made up the 180th Brigade. The 357th and the 358th Infantry Regiments made up the 179th Brigade, and both brigades provided the infantry for the 90th Division. The 180th Brigade

¹ Photograph of First Lieutenant George P. Cole, author's possession. See Appendix 1

was the Texas brigade and the 179th was the Oklahoma brigade. The 90th Division was formed as a National Army division, formed of draftees from these states.

The training site, Camp Travis, was within sight of old Fort Sam Houston, a sturdy military post since frontier days. The training was the same as other organizations in the United States preparing to go overseas. The training days were long and the discipline stiff.

The order to start for France came late in May 1918. Some of the enlisted men had only nine months training when they left Texas. The regiment reached Camp Albert L. Mills, Hoboken, New Jersey, a part of the New York Port of Embarkation, on June 12, 1918. The regimental commander was changed to Colonel Howard C. Price, and he was in command when the organization sailed on June 14. The soldiers sailed on the *SS Olympic*, one of the Cunard Ship Lines passenger liners, whose sister ships were the *Titanic* (which sank in 1913) and the *Britannic*. The *Olympic* landed at Southampton, England on June 23, and on the next night, smaller transports took the 360th Infantry Regiment across the English Channel to LeHavre, France, where it marched to its first French billets. The regiment then moved to the area of Rouvres sur Aube, where intensive training was started behind the lines. Training was completed on August 20, 1918, and the regiment was pronounced ready for field service. First Lieutenant George Peyton Cole was assigned to Company I, Third Battalion, 360th Infantry Regiment.

The American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) had been anxiously awaiting its opportunity since March 1918 to engage the enemy as a single American army, under its own generals. Its opportunity came when it was assigned to engage the Germans to reduce the St. Mihiel salient. This was a bulge in the German line into the allied sector near the town of St. Mihiel, France. This salient had been contested for four years, and the reduction of the salient would be the first

battle that the AEF fought as the 1st U. S. Army under General John J. Pershing. It was the first step in Pershing's plan for an independent AEF offensive toward Metz and the Rhine River.

The fight for the 90th Division started with the 90th relieving the U. S. 1st Division in the Saizerais sector on the night of August 21, 1918. August 22 found advance elements of the 360th Infantry Regiment advancing on the German strongholds. The First American Army centered attention on the reduction of the St. Mihiel salient of Germans. Since 1914, The Germans had penetrated into French territory and were blocking important avenues of communication. The Allies needed to advance at other points along the line. And it was clear that the general front occupied by the 90th Division would be the scene of important engagements during this action, and that the sector before the 360th Infantry would be particularly dangerous. "For in the Bois le Pretre, there was more barbed wire entanglements than existed on any other sector of the western front... this was the complex problem which seemingly confronted the regiment."²

On August 30, 1918, the 90th Division launched its attack on the St. Mihiel salient. The Germans were withdrawing after holding the position for four years. The Americans reduced it completely in two weeks. First Lieutenant Cole's Company I and attached machine gun teams from the 345th Machine Gun Battalion, under the leadership of Major James W. F. Allen of the Third Battalion, swept the Germans on September 13 from Camp de Norroy and the abandoned town of Norroy, France.³ Brigadier General U. G. McAlexander of the 180th Brigade planned the next attack into the Bois le Pretre. And on September 13, Colonel Price led the capture of the Bois le Pretre, a wooded area thought impossible to recapture. The next phase was to establish a

² Victor F. Barnett, *A History of the Activities and Operations of the 360th Infantry Regiment in the World War, 1914-1918* (Zeltigen, Germany, 1919), 26.

³ Barnett, *A History of the 360th Infantry Regiment*, 29.

line in the Bois de Chenaux and on Hill 327. On September 15, Company I, including First Lieutenant Cole, commanded by First Lieutenant Joseph S. Barnett, successfully established itself in the German trenches on the south slope of Hill 327. Under heavy packs and wearing gas masks, the companies from the 1st Battalion persevered. To hold the line at Hill 327, each company of the 2nd and 3rd Battalions sent forward a platoon to reinforce the front. This included George Cole's Company I of the Third Battalion, where its Sergeant Mullins was wounded in the head the first moment he started forward with his platoon, crossing a valley within sight of enemy observers. He refused to go back. The St. Mihiel Offensive was ahead of schedule and a success. Casualties for the offensive claimed fifteen percent of the 360th Infantry Regiment.

After this successful action, the First Army initiated another attack in which the Americans attacked the Germans on a northern axis of advance between the Meuse River and the Argonne Forest. This campaign, known as the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, was initiated by the Americans soon after the St. Mihiel action was completed. George Peyton Cole was transferred by his commander to Company A of the First Battalion for this operation. He was part of the 180th Brigade that relieved the 179th Brigade on October 30-31, 1918. As part of General McAlexander's plan, the 360th Infantry Regiment was to make the actual assault in the front of the line.

Very quickly after the St. Mihiel offensive, the First Army staff moved divisions of men and material. An army had to be moved many miles complete with supporting artillery, ammunition, and supplies, all in only two weeks. The Americans loaded their troops into camions, the French word for open-sided trucks. The troop movement was planned by Colonel George C. Marshall, a First Army staff officer. To move nine divisions, 2,000 guns and 600,000 tons of ammunition and supplies, stretched the AEF new limits. A single division's artillery,

seventy-two guns, could occupy ten miles of road space. The artillery to be moved would require three hundred miles of road. In addition, the infantry of a single American division required nine hundred trucks to move.⁴

The First Army's new zone of action presented serious challenges. The 360th Infantry Regiment was at about 65 percent strength on October 31. Colonel Hugh A. Drum, Chief of Staff, U. S. First Army, called the sector 'the most ideal defensive terrain I have ever seen or read about.'"⁵

The Battle of St. Mihiel was widely acclaimed as a great success for the AEF, but Pershing, despite his general satisfaction, would not allow himself nor the nearly two million men in his command any time to rest and savor victory. Moving into position to attack on September 26 at Meuse-Argonne was a staggering task. The problem was made much worse by the fact that the entire group of divisions and equipment had to be moved westward across the Meuse at St. Mihiel and northward across the face of the battlefield to get in position to face the enemy. Much was done at night to conceal troops from German observation. "Fortunately, the French had experience in this type of troop movement, and to cope with it they had created a single office, concentrating all authority in the hands of a single individual. The Chief of the Military Automobile Service, Major Doumenc, made up in competence what he lacked in rank." "With Doumenc's help, American troops were moved up in line behind the French successfully. Marshall later wondered 'how in the world the concentration was ever put through in the face of so many complications.'"⁶

⁴ John. S. D. Eisenhower, *Yanks* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 198.

⁵ Quoted in Eisenhower, *Yanks*, 200.

⁶ Eisenhower, *Yanks*, 200.

One great concern for Pershing was the ability of the Germans to reinforce the Meuse-Argonne sector with reserve divisions. The Germans had been defending this territory since 1914, with concrete emplacements and miles of barbed wire, and the lines had changed very little since then. The Germans had made the positions strong, and they had made the troops who occupied the area as comfortable as possible. The area was full of trenches and tunnels built by the Germans, and there were narrow gauge railroads connecting the defensive belts. The Germans were very confident of their ability to reinforce it. “Within twenty-four hours, according to Pershing’s staff, the enemy could augment the Meuse-Argonne front with four new divisions. In another twenty-four hours, they could bring in two more. Nine more could arrive in seventy-two hours. Thus, in five days the German total could reach twenty divisions.”⁷

During the last of October, fighting was heavy around Kriemhilde Stellung. First Lieutenant George Peyton Cole’s Company A, First Battalion, 360th Infantry Regiment, was in reserve with the rest of the 90th Division waiting to be committed to the battle. There were several reinforced lines that the Germans had built, east to west, across a line of ridges, which the Germans intended to be impenetrable by the Americans. This line was called the “Hindenburg Line” and part of it that faced the Americans was called the Kriemhilde Stellung. Pershing would have to advance his army rapidly if he hoped to break the Kriemhilde Stellung before the arrival of German reinforcements could make American loss of life unacceptable. The actual assault on the Freya Stellung, a key part of the Kriemhilde Stellung, was to be the mission of the 180th Brigade, with the 360th Infantry Regiment, and begin on November 1, 1918. First Lieutenant Cole faced his second offensive.

⁷ Eisenhower, *Yanks*, 203.

On November 1, 1918, the 360th Infantry Regiment led the attack on Hill 321 at the village of Villers-devant-Dun. It was late in the day and raining. Even when darkness came the battle continued until 8:00 pm. On November 2, it was still raining, so the attack did not start early. Lieutenant Cole's platoon took the lead in the company formation. According to AEF practice, the platoons took turns leading attacks. Lieutenant Cole knew that he and his platoon were at greatest risk in the attack of November 2 because they were the first echelon in the company's column of platoons. On the evening of November 1, Lieutenant Cole told another officer that he expected to be killed the next day. He even gave away some of his possessions because he expected he would not need them.⁸

Lieutenant Cole's objective, Hill 321, was about 100 feet high and was located near the village of Villers-devant-Dun. It was occupied by several German machine guns, and had been in German hands for several years. The Germans had erected some observation towers on the hill made of steel, whose foundations remain there today. Hill 321 was on a farm owned by Guy Ribon. It is still owned by the Ribon family.

At about 11 am on November 2, 1918, and still raining, the 360th Regiment attacked the Germans. Company A captured the hill and killed many Germans. After the successful attack, Lieutenant Cole was standing next to his friend Lieutenant Preston G. Northrup, when Lieutenant Cole was hit in the lung by a German machine gun bullet. He was wounded, but he would not let his men take him to an aid station until all his wounded men had been taken to receive medical help.⁹ Lieutenant Cole died that night, November 2, 1918. He was buried near where he was killed by his best friend, Lieutenant Preston G. Northrup. The fighting by the First

⁸ Lieutenant Preston G. Northrup letter to Mr. W. P. Cole, November 7, 1920, author's possession. See Appendix 2.

⁹ Northrup, Letter to Mr. Cole.

Battalion was so intense that neither the Americans nor the Germans were able to take prisoners. Both of the other two battalions of the 360th Infantry Regiment took hundreds of prisoners. The fighting on Hill 321 continued under 11 am on November 11, 1918, when hostilities ceased everywhere under the terms of the armistice. That night the doughboys were solemn, rather than joyous, listening to sounds of German revelry because the fighting was over. The official casualty list reports that the last man in the 90th Division to be killed was Mechanic Carl Sheffield, who died at 10:30 on the morning of November 11. On November 12, the 360th Infantry Regiment was withdrawn from the line to be sent to a rest camp for a few weeks before beginning the long journey into Germany for occupation duty. The Americans followed the Germans all the way to the Rhine River. The 3rd U. S. Army occupied Koblenz bridgehead east of the Rhine River until June 1919.

The Family of George Peyton Cole Learns More About His Death

Ralston Steele Cole wrote an encouraging letter on December 13, 1918, to Mrs. W. S. Cole. He was a first lieutenant and commanding officer at Camp Pike, Arkansas. His job was to write to many soldiers' families after the Armistice to tell them about the status of their sons. This letter was actually written to his mother, Mrs. Walter Steele Cole. He was writing about his own brother First Lieutenant George Peyton Cole. It is obviously a form letter sent many families telling them to be proud and supportive of their returning loved one. He wrote of how important their service to the country had been. He even described how the returning soldier

could wear his uniform for four months from the date of discharge, and then he should return it to the base at Camp Pike.¹⁰

In a bizarre bit of timing, Cole's family received a Western Union Telegram sent on the same date, December 13, 1918, as the letter. This telegram brought the dreadful news to the parents of George Peyton Cole that their son had been killed in action over a month earlier. There is a mistake in the telegram telling them he died on November 1, 1918, but they later learned the actual date of his death was November 2, 1918.¹¹ Another letter telling of his death was sent about two weeks later from an Adjutant General of the Army in Washington, D. C. This letter also has the incorrect date of death. The writer of this letter suggested that Mr. Cole write to the Commanding Officer of Company I of the 360th Infantry for additional information.¹²

Colonel Howard C. Price, the commanding officer of the 360th Infantry, replied to Mr. Cole about a letter he received from New Orleans dated December 5, 1918. It seems that Mr. Cole must have known of his son's death before the telegram received on December 13, 1918. No information is known about how he knew about the death before the 13th. Colonel Price assured Mr. Cole that his son died a hero, leading his men into one of the hardest battles in which the AEF had taken part.¹³

At the end of January 1919, Walter Cole wrote to the commanding officer of Company I to ask for more details and to request that his personal effects be returned to New Orleans. Mr. Cole believed his son's trunk had been stored in Recey-sur-Ource, France, and that he had with

¹⁰ Ralston S. Cole letter to Mrs. W. S. Cole, December 13, 1918, author's possession.

¹¹ Western Union Telegram from Adjutant General Harris to Mr. Walter S. Cole, December 13, 1918, author's possession.

¹² Adjutant General (name illegible) letter to Mr. Walter S. Cole, December 26, 1918, author's possession.

¹³ Colonel Howard C. Price letter to Mr. W. S. Cole, January 20, 1919, author's possession.

him a bedding roll and a grip. Mr. Cole knew that his son might have been transferred to Company A.¹⁴ The Cole family never received any personal effects.

Eight months later Walter Cole received a second personal letter from Colonel Howard C. Price in response to his request for more information about his son's death. By then, Colonel Price was stationed in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Price's response of September 11, 1920, gave more information. In a detailed description of the battle, Price told Cole how his son's company remained in reserve until late in the afternoon of November 1. "The Hun was making a most persistent resistance and using everything that they had so you may know that it was all very hot work."¹⁵ The fighting went on until eight o'clock in the evening and resumed on the morning of November 2, 1918. Every single officer in the company was a casualty.¹⁶ The battle was finally won later that day. Colonel Price gave Mr. Cole three officers' names who might have more information. He also enclosed with his letter a copy of a small red book published in Germany on April 15, 1919, written by Second Lieutenant Victor F. Barnett, the official historian for the 360th Infantry Regiment. Hill 321 in Villers-devant-Dun appears on a map in the book. This small book is an invaluable account of the service of the 360th Regiment in France. Colonel Price went on to say he was fond of George and that he saw a great deal of him in camp, on the march, and in the bivouac. As his commanding officer, he was proud of every minute of George Cole's service.

As Colonel Price had suggested, Walter Steele Cole next wrote to Major William H. H. Morris at Texas A. and M. College in College Station, Texas, on October 24, 1919. Just two

¹⁴ Walter S. Cole letter to Commanding Office, Company I, 360th Infantry Division, January 29, 1919, author's possession.

¹⁵ Colonel Howard C. Price letter to Mr. W. S. Cole, September 11, 1920, author's possession.

¹⁶ Barnett, *The 360th*, 59.

days later, Major Morris replied to his letter.¹⁷ Morris had forwarded the letter to Lieutenant Northrup. He was unable to forward it to Lieutenant Gray because he was serving in Mexico at the time, and Morris did not have his address. In this letter, Morris described that George was with Company A, which was one of the leading companies in the 24-hour attack. The Doughboys on Hill 321 were fired upon from three directions by German machine guns of the 27th German Division. The fight almost came to bayonets, but the combatants stopped only about thirty or forty yards from each other, throwing hand grenades and firing rifle grenades. George was shot in the abdomen. It was drizzling at the time and very muddy. No medical assistance could be given to him at the time because the “litter bearers” had become casualties, too. Morris’ letter went on to say that on the next day, November 3, 1918, when the Doughboys were able to care for the wounded and dead after defeating the enemy, they found George in the front line, shot once in the stomach and once in the head. The only officer who survived the battle from Company A was Lieutenant Harold Shear of Waco, Texas, who was severely wounded through the lungs.

The most important and interesting of all the letters Mr. Cole received was written on November 7, 1920, by Preston G. Northrup.¹⁸ Colonel Price had forwarded Mr. Cole’s letter only ten days prior to Northrup’s letter. At the time, Preston Northrup was living in West Columbia, Texas. Mr. Northrup apologized for his long delay in writing. He and George Peyton Cole were very close friends in Camp Travis before the war and in France. While in training in Texas, Northrup ranked him among the best of the officers. And in France, he even “eclipsed” his record in the United States. Fighting on Hill 321 on November 1 had been at such close

¹⁷ Major W. H. H. Morris, Jr. letter to Mr. W. S. Cole, October 26, 1920, author’s possession.

¹⁸ Preston G. Northrup letter to Mr. W. S. Cole, November 7, 1920, author’s possession.

quarters that the U. S. artillery was virtually useless. “With soft flesh and a rifle this hill was to be taken at all cost.” Northrup and Cole spoke with one another seconds before the leap over the top to capture the hill. They realized many would be “sleeping on the hills of France” before the hill could be captured. Cole said to Northrup, “Prep, I know that they are going to get me, but I’m man enough to face it. I will die in the front line leading the advance.” Northrup buried him the next morning on Hill 321. His good friend now slept “with the red poppies eloquently bespeaking the brave and courageous manner in which ‘the supreme sacrifice’ was made.” Before his death, George Cole gave one friend his compass and another one his knife. Northrup wrote that Cole had a premonition of his death and “when a man feels he has a fighting chance to survive, his courage is not taxed nearly so much as one who feels that he is walking into the jaws of certain death, but who walks with a calm, fearless tread, with a smile on his face and a word of encouragement to his men.”¹⁹

Northrup sent a copy of his letter to the Army and Navy Club at 201 Madison Avenue, New York City, New York. There is a stamp on the letter that says the club received the letter on November 13, 1920. Six months latter Walter Cole wrote to Major Hibbard of the Army and Navy Club about a questionnaire he had received from New York. Mr. Cole filled out a form with details of George Cole’s military record. This club keeps an archive of information about military members that can still be used for research.

On November 19, 1920, Lieutenant Colonel, W. S. Sinclair, Recruiting Officer in New Orleans, asked George Cole’s family to apply for the Victory Medal given by the United States.²⁰ There was no response. Many years later, George Peyton Cole IV, a retired Air Force

¹⁹ Northrup, Letter dated November 7, 1920.

²⁰ W. S. Sinclair letter dated November 19, 1920, author’s possession.

Brigadier General, contacted Congressman Billy Tauzin (Republican-Louisiana). The congressman arranged a ceremony in which the medals were presented to General Cole on behalf of deceased First Lieutenant Cole, over 90 years after his death. Please see Appendix 3.

On June 30, 1921, Walter Cole received another eloquent letter from his deceased son's friend, Preston G. Northrup. Mr. Cole had begun a search for his son's personal effects—a suitcase or trunk. Northrup was not able to actually give much information, but he told how his suitcase had been lost after the war. It had contained his most cherished possessions, including his diary, war souvenirs, laces, Iron Crosses, and military papers.²¹

Bringing George Peyton Cole Home to New Orleans, Louisiana

The death of one infantry first lieutenant is inconsequential in an army that loses 52,000 officers and men to combat deaths, almost all of them in less than six months. It is certainly of consequence to a family in which the grieving, the sense of a life of possibility lost, is dominant. No sense of cause, of sacrifice to an ideal (“make the world safe for democracy”) can fully drive away the sorrow. The sadness goes on and on. A grateful government, however, may at least show some respect for grief-stricken families, and in World War I for the first time the federal government tried to do something more than publish casualty lists in the domestic newspapers. First of all, someone in authority was supposed to report the fate of a service member; he was killed in action, missing in action, died of wounds, or wounded in action. Then there were accidental deaths and disease deaths to be reported through the Headquarters American Expeditionary Forces, which tried to create a centralized accounting system through the War

²¹ Preston G. Northrup letter to Mr. W. S. Cole, June 30, 1921, author's possession.

Department in Washington. As generations of first sergeants have observed, dying creates an administrative burden for an army. The army itself needs to know the numbers, ranks, and skills it needs to replace. Families, represented by the Congress, want to know the circumstances of a loved one's death, the place of burial (if known), the fate of the deceased's personal effects, and any financial business that should be settled like back-pay and allowances. In World War I a serviceman could buy at a bargain rate, subtracted from his pay, a life insurance policy of \$10,000 payable if he died during his military service. George Cole had \$57.50 deducted each month from his paycheck to pay for this insurance. The amount was consequential and led to the euphemism that a Doughboy would "buy the farm" if he died. The euphemism became a subcultural way to identify a combat death: "He bought the farm."

Families, certainly in 1918, wanted to be reassured that their sons, husbands, and fathers had not died in vain, a question with no good answer in mass, industrialized warfare. The best that unit commanders could say was that Lieutenant X had done his duty and did not suffer, whatever the tactical circumstances. Any official notice from the War Department by telegram or letter could offer little more in detail, and in World War I the army, meaning the Quartermaster Department, had a question for every family (if located) that reflected a new policy: Assuming there were identifiable remains, did a family want the remains buried abroad in a cemetery managed by the U. S. government (the American Battle Monuments Commission), or did the family want the remains to be returned to the United States for permanent interment in a national cemetery (e. g. Arlington National Cemetery), or to be buried elsewhere (a family plot) in a private cemetery designated by the family? This was a novel policy since German, French, and British Commonwealth soldiers remained buried in the land where they fell in World War I.

Whether the War Department's policies on casualty reporting and the disposition of remains represented an effort to legitimate the staggering losses of the AEF or to provide well-intended solace to bereaved families, the results might produce the opposite effect, a growing doubt about the worthiness of the American cause and the competence of the U. S. Army and the War Department. The fate of First Lieutenant George Cole's remains and personal property left in France demonstrated the perils of returning remains to a family for private burial.

An associate with the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery in France informed the family that soldiers were first buried in one of 149 temporary cemeteries near the battle lines. The Federal Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri, located the personal (201) file of George P. Cole. First Lieutenant George Peyton Cole was reburied within the next year or two after the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in the newly designated Meuse-Argonne Cemetery at Romagne, France. The ground for the cemetery was ceded to the U. S. government by France to be the eternal resting place for American troops killed in World War I. The cemetery is the largest American cemetery outside the United States and is part of the memorials and cemeteries administered by the American Battle Monuments Commission. The cemetery was built under the guidance of General John J. Pershing (Ret), who was the first head of the American Battle Monuments Commission after he retired from the army.

George Cole only remained in the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery a short while. His family chose to have George Peyton Cole's body brought back to New Orleans for burial in 1921.

Arrangements were made to receive his body in New York and transport it to New Orleans.²²

On August 28, 1921, the bodies of 5,795 soldiers arrived on the transport ship *Wheaton*. More

²² Western Union Telegram from Graves Registration Service to Walter Steele Cole, August 23, 1921, author's possession.

than 10,000 people attended the memorial service that day in Hoboken, New Jersey. The bodies were shipped to their home towns the following week.²³ George Cole was buried with military honors in Metairie Cemetery. A marble gravestone marks his grave.

After George Peyton Cole was killed on November 2, the 360th Infantry Regiment continued attacking the Germans as they retreated across the Meuse River. The American regiment chased them to the river but not across, because the Germans were firing at the Americans as they approached the river. The 360th Infantry Regiment was exhausted and many were sick with influenza. They went back the several miles to Villers-devant-Dun and rested in the shelter of the brick barns there. They recovered until November 11, when the cease fire and armistice started.

Conclusion

What a tremendous difference it would have made if an armistice had been signed when first offered by Germany in October. What an enormous difference it would have made if George Peyton Cole had arrived in France a few days later. Would he have survived and come home to a full life in New Orleans? Timing was not on his side. If one visits the American Meuse-Argonne Cemetery at Romagne, France, one cannot help but notice the large number of American young men who lay there who were killed on November 1 and 2, 1918, and up until November 11 at 11 a.m.

²³ Western Union Telegram from Walter Steele Cole to Graves Registration Service, August 25, 1921, author's possession.

Epilogue

My interest in my great uncle George Peyton Cole's death dates back to about my tenth birthday. My grandfather Ralston Steele Cole has a number of souvenirs and books dating to the Great War and he explained much of it to me and he told me about George Peyton Cole. About ten years ago, I discovered a large file containing many letters and telegrams from the war. I was able to pinpoint the location, date, and time of the death of my great uncle. In 2008, I decided to go to the location of the town of Villers-devant-Dun and the hill (Hill 321) where George was killed.

On October 31, 2008, I took my wife and my daughter, who has a history degree from LSU, to France. We rented a four-wheel drive SUV and started in Paris and visited many World War I battle sites. My daughter is an accomplished photographer,²⁴ and she photographed many battle scenes and American cemeteries beginning at the American monument at Chateau Thierry. We spent the night in Rheims and visited the Marne and the cemeteries at Belleau Wood, Aisne, Arne, and stayed in Verdun. While in Verdun I purchased an oil painting, painted during the war and stamped by the American Expeditionary Forces, of a barrage balloon over the heads of three American soldiers.²⁵ We drove down the Meuse River and visited Montfaucon and the battle sites at Bantheville, Dun, and the Heights of the Meuse. We visited Romagne. The battle sites are beautifully preserved and the cemeteries are beautiful. The chapels and marble maps are amazingly preserved. The cemetery offices are beautiful and the cemetery staff personnel are very knowledgeable and cooperative. We went to the town of Villers-devant-Dun and we were

²⁴ See Appendix 5.

²⁵ See Appendix 4.

there the afternoon of November 2, 2008, on Hill 321, 90 years to the minute after George Peyton Cole was killed. My great uncle's best friend, Lieutenant Preston G. Northrup, described the Hill as a 100-foot-high wooded hill, which is a perfect description. The family that owns the hill is the Ribon family, and Guy Ribon showed us the location of the German machine guns on that fateful day. He showed us the steel foundations the machine guns were mounted on.

I had a metal detector and I found a number of French cartridge cases from the French Hotchkiss machine guns used by the Americans. Monsieur Ribon told me that his grandfather was present on the day of the battle. He told me that the Americans stayed in his barns after November 11 to recover from flu and wounds.

Later we toured the cemetery at St. Mihiel and that battlefield.

The tour of the battlefields and cemeteries was very informative and I got a perspective of the layout of the incredible fight. It was an emotional experience, and the whole visit gave us a perspective that helped the healing process. It was interesting to see how small the Meuse River is and to see the small area where hundreds of thousands of men fought and died.

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Appendix 1



Photograph of George P. Cole from 1917. In possession of author.

Appendix 2

Mr. W. P. Cole,
% Norton, Lilly & Co. Steamship Agents,
New Orleans, La.

Box #121.
West Columbia, Tex.
November 7, 1920.
First Lieut. Geo. P. Cole.
Co. "A" 360th Inf. 90th Div.

Dear Mr. Cole:-

I am just in receipt of your letter of October 24th requesting information as to the record of your son, First Lieutenant George P. Cole, Company "A", 360th Infantry, 90th Division, A.E.F. in France. Please pardon the delay, but I was in Mexico on receipt of this letter and have just returned.

Your son and I were very close friends both in Camp Travis and in France. In Camp Travis he was ranked among the best of our officers, always attending strictly to duty, was a good disciplinarian, knew how to handle men to a marked degree, and was one of the best disciplined and efficient officers in the regiment.

In France he even eclipsed his record in the United States. While I can't speak authoritatively on his operations other than in the Argonne, still I know that his entire record in France was one of brilliant achievement.

When we went over the top in the Argonne Forest on November 1st, I went over the top with the assaulting Third Battalion, then was ordered to join the relieving Second Battalion which executed a passage of troops to relieve the battle-worn Third Battalion. On the night of the first of November 1918, the Second Battalion was relieved by the First Battalion by a passage of lines, and from the time of this relief up to the time of your son's death I was with "A" company and the First Battalion. What I know of his record in the Argonne from first hand, personal contact is as follows:

On the night of the 1st of November, 1918 the First Battalion, of which "A" Company was a part, was ordered to take the fortified village and hills of Andevanne, France. Under cover of darkness the battalion marched up to the town and the surrounding tree-covered hills and routed the Germans coming in their line of march. The night was spent in a drizzling rain and the coldness of ~~November~~ November on a wooded hill east of Andevanne, the 360th Infantry occupying one portion of the hill, the Germans occupying the other portion. During the night combat patrols had contact with a few of the Germans and captured them and their horses. When day broke, "A" Company, of which your son was commander of one platoon, had a smart skirmish with the German Machine Gun Battalion and the Artillery occupying the other portion of the hill, and killed and captured a goodly number of the Germans, including two officers. The Germans then withdrew to a long sloping hill known as "Hill 321" while we stayed on our hill awaiting orders and organizing our position for a counterattack. Your son through-out the day and night of the First and Second of November, 1918 was in the midst of the thickest of the fighting, and showed remarkable coolness and bravery and leadership under the intensest of machine gun, rifle and heavy artillery fire.

The Germans ~~have~~ rushed up additional machine gun ~~in~~ troops and infantry reserves, and thoroughly organized Hill 321, at the same time pouring down an annihilating artillery fire on the First Battalion. We received orders to take Hill 321, the zero hour of going over the top to be eleven o'clock on the morning of November 2nd, 1918. "A" Company was to lead the assault on the hill, which was a long sloping hill literally infested with Germans and machine guns, with a clear field of fire on the Americans extending for about a mile. We had advanced so far on the

WFC #2 - Record of 1st Lieut. Geop P. Cole, deceased.

1st of November that our artillery was virtually useless, so the attack was to take place virtually without artillery preparation. With soft flesh and a rifle this hill was to be taken at all cost, since the other regiment was suffering heavy casualties from machine fire from this hill, which was one of the best organized defences of the famous Freya-Stellung last line of defence.

I talked to your son about 30 seconds before we were to make the leap over the top and capture this hill. All of us realized that many would be sleeping on the hills of France before the hill was captured, for the task was a supremely difficult one. None realized better than us officers just what a sacrifice was necessary to take this hill, and your son in answer to my query as to what he thought his chances of surviving the attack were, answered "Prep, I know that they are going to get me, but I'm man enough to face it. I will die in the front line leading the advance." I buried him the next morning, by the side of his Captain, less than 20 feet behind the most advanced position occupied by the troops after the hill was taken. Along with hundreds of others of the first battalion he went down under the withering rifle and machine gun fire with a bullet through his lungs, and died during the night, refusing to be evacuated to the advanced First Aid Station before others he considered more seriously wounded than he had received treatment. In true accord with his entire military career, the lives of his men were to him more sacred than his own, and voluntarily, perhaps, the supreme sacrifice was made to save the lives of the privates of his company. What attention could be given without the aid of physicians was administered by two men in his platoon, but they couldn't hold off death, and during the night he passed into the realm of those who now sleep on the hills of France, with the red poppies eloquently bespeaking the brave and courageous manner in which ~~made~~ "the supreme sacrifice." was made. In his thoughtfulness and gratitude to the men who were by his side when he died, he gave each of them a present, one a compass, the other a knife. The entire regiment mourned the loss of your son, for we knew that a real man and a real soldier had gone from us.

Your son for some unaccountable reason had a strong premonition that he was going to be killed, and before the start of the Argonne fight gave as presents most of his surplus clothes and equipment to officers and men in the regiment. In my opinion, his calm, conservative leadership, and indomitable courage were matchless with him knowing full well that he was to be called upon to make the supreme sacrifice. Where a man feels that he has a fighting chance to survive, his courage is not taxed nearly so much as one who feels that he is walking into the jaws of certain death, but who walks with a ~~calm~~ fearless tread, with a smile on his face and a word of encouragement to his men.

You, the father of such a soldier and such a gentleman, are to be congratulated for giving to the country a boy of his qualities and character. I salute you.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Army and Navy Club, 201 Madison Ave. New York City. What I have said in this letter is the absolute truth, and I am willing to sign this letter, if necessary, in affidavit form before a Notary Public.

If at any time I can be of further assistance to you, please call upon me. Had I known your address, I would have long since written you the details of the death of your son. I would be pleased to have an acknowledgment of the receipt of this letter, in order that I may know you have received it.

With every good wish, I am

cc
Army & Navy Club, N. Y.

Sincerely



Ex-1st Lieut. & Capt. 360th Infantry.

Appendix 3



Medals awarded to George P.Cole: Purple Heart (right side), French Victory Medal (lower left) and Silver Star (upper left). Victory Medal indicates campaigns in which Lt. Cole fought. In possession of George P. Cole III.

Appendix 4



Painted in 1918 by unknown AEF artist. Painting shows American soldiers and observation balloon with Meuse River in the foreground. Painting in possession of author was purchased in Verdun, France, November 2008.

Appendix 5



Remnants of German World War I machine gun mounts on Hill 321. Photographs by Virginia Cole Logan



Top: Meuse River near location of Lieutenant Cole's death.

Bottom: Meuse-Argonne U.S. Cemetery in Romagne, France.

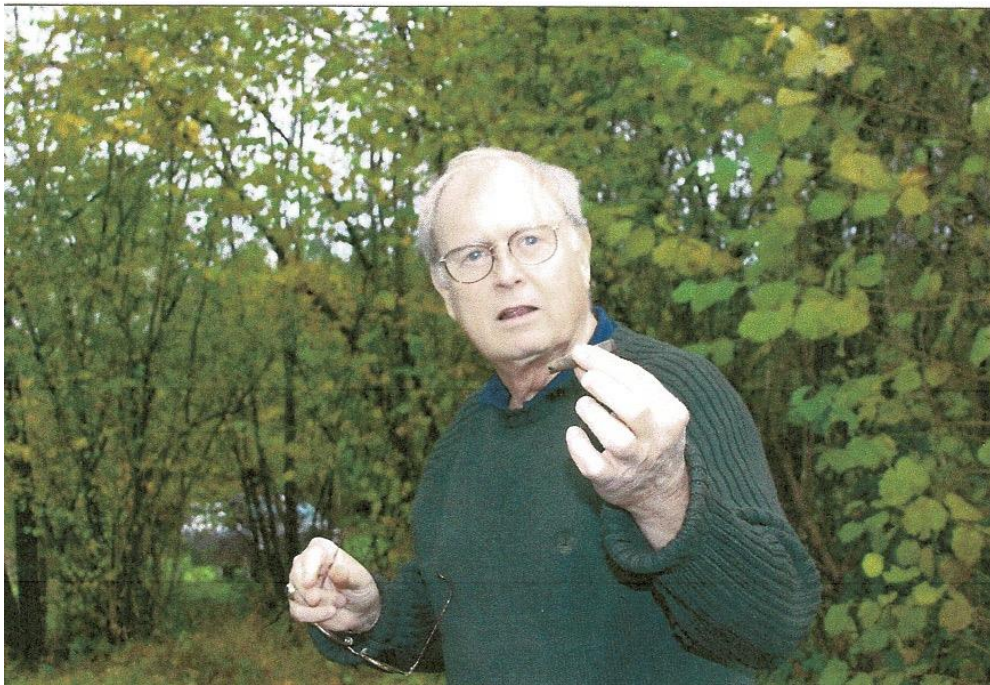
Photographs by Virginia Cole Logan.



Top: Author on Hill 321, site of Lieutenant Cole's death.

Bottom: View of Hill 321 in Villars-devant-Dun, France.

Photographs by Virginia Cole Logan.



Top: Church ruins on top of Montfauchon on the Meuse-Argonne battlefield.

Bottom: Author with recovered Hotchkiss cartridge case used by American troops.

Photographs by Virginia Cole Logan.

Vita

Ralston P. Cole is a native of New Orleans. He graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1962 with a B.S. in Engineering. After four and one-half years of active duty, he attended Louisiana State University and in 1971 received a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering. He subsequently owned and operated a worldwide diesel distributorship. He will receive an MA in History from the University of New Orleans in May 2018.