

# TRIBUTE TO COLONEL JOSEPH B. WESTNEDGE

By

Father Patrick R. Dunigan, Chaplain 126th Regiment, 32nd Division

"I cannot read and I cannot write,  
Though I strive the livelong day,  
For a voice is calling, calling low  
Your soldier has passed away.

He of the strong and tender soul,  
He of the helping hand,  
Has sailed away with the boatman pale,  
To a fairer, brighter land.

Over thorns in the path of roses rare,  
He has passed to the God of might,  
Who has greeted him with a father's love,  
And placed him at his right."

Colonel Joseph B. Westnedge, 126th Infantry, one of the very few National Guard Colonels to command his own Regiment until the last, was dead! His comrades wept as men do who have known too much of the tragedy of war, wept silently. He had been sick during the final days of the decisive battle and officers who knew him longest watched his strength break; felt the pain as he staggered from weakness. The Regimental Surgeon had urged him to go back for rest and treatment. In the stress of battle "Carry on" to the last ounce of endurance was the order. The Colonel who had never used the privileges of his rank, remained with his men. On foot, on the field, in the fight, he shared the privations and dangers of the enlisted men. When blankets were scarce he slept cold, when food was difficult to get he ate last and least. He knew the enemy position by personal observation before ordering an advance.

"Where's your Colonel?" asked a general officer inspecting the line one dark day in the Argonne. "Up ahead." "Where's his headquarters?" "Up ahead," repeated the soldier. Always ahead where the cutting edge of the 32nd Division bit deepest into the enemy resistance he led the attack. Corrected field reports on the authority of Major General Haan credit the 126th Infantry with breaking the last desperately defended enemy line. "Colonel Joe," the knightly leader, who had written the fame of his Regiment bright across the page of his country's history, was denied a grave among the battle dead of his own Regiment, strangers' hands had laid him tenderly to rest at Nantes and the bleeding heart of his Regiment mourned as children mourn. The giant, generous chief whom rank and success could not spoil, whose service was unselfish without envy, simple as a child, lives in the hearts of his men.

After Alsace, Chateau-Thierry, and the Ourcq he led his Regiment to the Vesle River, then to the victory at Juvigny, where our graves are most numerous, through the long awful Argonne until, believing that we had been relieved for the last time, he went back to rest. The Armistice would conclude hostilities in a day or two, now his work might be delegated to another. We had grown so accustomed to his remarkable endurance, to his unselfish disregard of personal comfort and safety, that no one considered his condition serious. To have found his body among the battle dead of his Regiment would have caused no surprise. We remembered with pride that he had been ordered to take greater care of his life; said General Haan

*(Excerpt from the Kalamazoo County Honor Roll 1917 – 1919)*

"We cannot spare you." He smiled in answer and forgot about it. This is perhaps the only order he ever disregarded. His was the soul of a fighting leader.

Senior officers, including John J. Pershing himself, have written their sympathy and appreciation; his Country sent the Distinguished Service Cross; France has enrolled him among her heroes and sent the Cross of War to his widow. French mothers have planted roses that twine about the cross that marks his grave, his grave in that land of splendid romance and chivalry. "Up to Heaven's doorway floats a delicate cloud of bugle notes 'Peace to you'—your soul shall be where heroes are—your memory shine as a morning star, brave and dear—shield us here—Farewell."