

Wrangell History Unlocked Presents:

# The Illuminating Life of Private Palmer

Transcript Date: May 26, 2023

## Introduction

October 4, 1918. The Battle of Mont Blanc. Three Marines crouch inside a patch of woods, surrounded by enemy gunfire on all sides, and raining down from above. This moment will go down in Marine Corps history as “The Box.”

Victory is within reach for the Allies. After four long years, World War 1 is weeks away from ending. But first, to seal the deal, the Marines must take this hill.

One of these Marines is a 25-year-old sharpshooter, Merlin Palmer. The war is a detour from his true plans to spread light around the world, from his hometown in Nebraska, all the way to Alaska.

But first, he’s got to make it out of The Box.

I’m your host, Ronan Rooney. Today, on Wrangell History Unlocked, it’s The Illuminating Life of Private Palmer.

# CH 1. The Spark

## Birth

Merlin Elmer Palmer was born on Valentine's Day 1893 in Stamford, Nebraska. Merlin was the last of nine children born to Judson Anson Palmer and his wife, Julia Adelia Palmer. Every two years Julia gave birth to a child, adding to her large family, and finally, Merlin arrived seven years after her last child.

To celebrate, Merlin's father, Judson, handed out cigars<sup>1</sup> at the family business, an elevator used to slaughter hogs and cattle.

Merlin's father was one of the first settlers of Stamford, Nebraska, built on the land of the Plains Indians, such as the the Pawnee, Arapaho, and Sioux Nations. Stand anywhere, and you can see for miles over gentle rolling hills, criss-crossed by long, country roads. Wide open blue skies give way to the occasional lightning and thunders storm, and even tornados. Then, as now, life revolves around farming. Stamford is part of Harlan County, which sits near the middle of Nebraska's southern border with Kansas.

Merlin's oldest siblings, Alfred, William, and Mabel were 23, 21, and 19 when Merlin was born — old enough to be out of the house. That likely left 16 year-old Orville as the responsible oldest sibling in the house, when baby Merlin joined the family. For the rest of his life, Merlin would look to Orville as a role model and guiding light.

## Orville & Herbert

When Merlin was 5, Orville went to Alaska to try his luck in the Klondike Gold Rush. Orville didn't strike it rich, but he liked what he saw: The Stikine River and the town of Wrangell at its mouth. Orville returned to Nebraska and talked his brother Herbert into moving to Wrangell. Just after Merlin's 10th birthday, Orville and Herbert left for Wrangell.<sup>2</sup>

Four years later, Herbert returned to Stamford to celebrate Christmas.

He must have told about life with his brother in Alaska, about how the locals dubbed them "the Palmer brothers." They went hunting, fishing, and worked as part of a logging crew. On the most recent 4th of July, the loggers competed in a tug-of-war against the miners, lasting 27 minutes in the rain, until the loggers won.<sup>3</sup>

While Herbert spent Christmas south with the family, back in Wrangell, Orville was working up a Christmas surprise. Whether Herbert knew it or not, Orville bought Wrangell's powerhouse in both their names. The local paper remarked,

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<sup>1</sup> 1893.02.24 Beaver Valley Tribune

<sup>2</sup> 1903.03.06 Orville\_Palmer\_and\_Herbert\_Palmer\_to\_Alaska.pdf

<sup>3</sup> 1907.07.11 Alaska Sentinel.pdf

Both are exemplary young men who have cast their lot in Alaska, and we are pleased to welcome them into the business affairs of the town.<sup>4</sup>

The Wrangell Electric Light and Power Company was only three years old,<sup>5</sup> but in its short existence, it revolutionized Wrangell. Within a month of incorporation, the town council approved nineteen streetlights.<sup>6</sup> Homes and businesses had electrical light for the very first time. Wrangell was coming out of the darkness.

Immediately after buying the powerhouse, Orville ran an ad in the local paper:

ELECTRIC WIRING FREE. To all persons who agree to take electric lights for a year or more, we will do the wiring and furnish the first lamps free of charge. PALMER BROTHERS.<sup>7</sup>

## Alfred

The Palmer Brothers were in business, and Herbert knew there was more than enough work to go around. Herbert wouldn't be going back to Wrangell alone. The eldest Palmer sibling, Alfred, would come with him. Unlike Orville and Herbert, Alfred was married. He and his wife, Mary, had a son, Leonard. The group left for Wrangell shortly after Merlin's 11th birthday.<sup>8</sup>

## Tragic Death

For over a year, the Palmer brothers ran Wrangell's powerhouse. In letters back home, Alfred described adventures among the forests and glaciers. Tragically, it would be short-lived. On June 8, 1909, Alfred's wife, Mary, became ill and passed away. She was only 30 years old. The Wrangell Sentinel wrote:

Mrs. Palmer, although a resident in Wrangell but a comparatively short time, had a considerable circle of friends who mourn her untimely taking off, and, with the town folk in general extend the hand of sympathy to the husband and motherless son...<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 1908.01.16 Alaska Sentinel clipping

<sup>5</sup> 1905.01.05 Alaska Sentinel clipping

<sup>6</sup> 1905.02.09 Alaska Sentinel clipping

<sup>7</sup> 1908.01.23 Alaska Sentinel clipping

<sup>8</sup> 1908.04.02 Alaska Sentinel clipping

<sup>9</sup> 1909.06.10 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

## Orville Alone

Alfred was heartbroken and wanted to leave. And Herbert wanted to go with him. The brothers sold their stake in the powerhouse to Orville and a Wrangell businessman named Joe Ensley.<sup>10</sup> The Palmer Brothers of Wrangell were reduced, to just Orville.

Meanwhile, in Stamford, Merlin was becoming a quintessential American teenage farmboy. He attended a rural school that went all the way up to the 10th grade. Merlin attended church near Stamford,<sup>11</sup> and in 1910 he played the villain in “Dot The Miner’s Daughter” or “One Glass of Wine,” a church temperance drama.<sup>12</sup>

As a teenager, he got interested in working on cars. The August 12, 1910 Stamford Post wrote:

Merlin Palmer is getting to be very handy with their new auto. The auto is getting used to running and now goes very smoothly.<sup>13</sup>

After Merlin turned 18, the Alma light and power plant hired him as an assistant.<sup>14</sup> Merlin was a promising young man who was clearly well liked, could handle responsibility, and had technical skill.

His lucky break came two months later that fall, when Orville returned from Wrangell after a long absence. For the first time, Orville saw his baby brother as a grown man — 18 years old and able to make a living for himself.

Together, they could rebuild the Palmer Brothers dynasty in Wrangell. Orville must have told Merlin about duck hunting and fishing trips, about the cool weather and long, summer days. About the 4th of July. The Palmer Brothers had a solid reputation in Wrangell, through good times and bad, and Merlin would fit right in.

But the real reason for Orville’s visit came first. The 35 year-old lifelong bachelor needed a wife. Shortly before Thanksgiving, Orville married Catherine Sasse in her

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<sup>10</sup> 1909.07.15 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

<sup>11</sup> 1909.11.05 Stamford Post

<sup>12</sup> 1910.06.03 Stamford Post

<sup>13</sup> 1910.08.12 Stamford Post

<sup>14</sup> 1911.09.08 Scaffers Alma Record.pdf

parents' home.<sup>15</sup> The newlyweds soon left for Wrangell, leaving Merlin behind to contemplate his choices.

Merlin reaching manhood was a milestone for the Palmer family. For the first time in 42 years, Judson and Julia Palmer did not have a child under 18 living in their home. The sounds of children echoing through the Palmer house had long since faded. It was just Merlin, his two aging parents, and memories of what used to be.

Merlin always had a place in Stamford, but he set his sights to the horizon on the west, and envisioned a life for himself in Alaska.

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<sup>15</sup> 1911.11.02 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

# CH 2. Merlin in Alaska

## Merlin Moves to Alaska

A few months after Orville's visit, Merlin moved to Wrangell, arriving just before his 19th birthday in February 1912.<sup>16</sup>

Wrangell couldn't look more different than Stamford. In 1912, Wrangell was a scrappy coastal fishing town, built right to the water's edge, and frequently on pilings over it. Periodic steamships and telegraph wire kept it connected with the outside world.

The city of Wrangell was a vibrant Tlingit village adapting to cultural changes like electricity, alongside a gold-rush camp built in the remains of the abandoned Army post of Fort Wrangel. The population sat somewhere in the high hundreds, but it was growing, thanks in part to the modern marvel of electricity provided by Orville's powerplant.

Merlin was the seventh Palmer to arrive in Wrangell. In the fall of 1912, Orville's wife, Catherine gave birth to their first child, a son, Carl. The year ended tragically, though, as Merlin's mother, Julia, became ill and passed away in Nebraska. It had barely been a year since he said goodbye to her and left for Wrangell. All the Palmer children attended her funeral, all except Merlin and Orville, in far away Wrangell, Alaska.<sup>17</sup> She was 63 years old.

As the days grew shorter, the importance of the powerhouse grew more clear. On Christmas Day, Wrangell has less than seven hours of daylight. There was always work to be done at the powerhouse, feeding the furnace or making repairs. It was a highly visible job. When the lights were on in town, the town was happy. But when the power went out, everyone noticed, and even the newspaper wrote about it.

## July 4, 1913

By his 20th birthday, Merlin had been in Wrangell a full year. The long winter gave way to the summer of 1913. Just as Orville and Herbert described it, the 4th of July was the highlight of every summer. The Wrangell Sentinel described Independence Day of 1913:

At the hour of midnight the firing of anvils, guns, revolvers, fire-crackers, torpedoes and in fact, any contrivance that could be made to make a noise was begun, and throughout the morning sleep was out of the question for those who lived near the "firing

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<sup>16</sup> 1912.02.15 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

<sup>17</sup> 1912.11.22 The Alma Record

line." The day was exceptionally fine and with the exception of occasional light showers, was all that could be wished for...<sup>18</sup>

The biggest prize of the street games was \$8, which went to Merlin's friend, A.R. Hall, for winning the one mile race.<sup>19</sup>

## Olympic Restaurant

The very next week, A.R. Hall put his \$8 to good use. He bought The Olympic Restaurant on Front Street, Wrangell. Merlin went in on it, too. The Wrangell Sentinel reported:

The Olympic Restaurant changed hands this week, J. Joseph retiring and Messrs. Palmer and Hall becoming the new proprietors. The boys are well known and should be successful in their new venture.<sup>20</sup>

The Olympic Restaurant was one of Wrangell's first businesses to have electricity.<sup>21</sup> Merlin went from being Orville's partner to being his client. Like his brother, Merlin co-owned a business in Wrangell. It may not have been all it was cracked up to be. One week after buying the restaurant, the Wrangell Sentinel reported Merlin was out on a hunting and fishing trip.<sup>22</sup> For Merlin, only 20, life behind the kitchen counter may not have been all he longed for. At the end of 1913, after only six months, Merlin sold his stake in the Olympic Restaurant to A.R. Hall.<sup>23</sup>

1914 was a year of change for Merlin. He left Wrangell, and returned to Stamford. It may have fallen to Merlin to help care for his aging, 73 year old father. At the age of 21, he was the only Palmer sibling without a spouse or family of his own.

Back where he started, Merlin contemplated his future. He came back two years wiser, having been enlightened by his experience in Alaska. His future was bright.

But far way in Europe, a war was beginning that would soon consume the world.

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<sup>18</sup> 1913.07.10 Wrangell Sentinel clippings

<sup>19</sup> 1913.07.10 Wrangell Sentinel clippings

<sup>20</sup> 1913.07.17 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

<sup>21</sup> 1905.06.01 Alaska Sentinel clipping

<sup>22</sup> 1913.07.24 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

<sup>23</sup> 1914.01.01 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

# CH 3. Enlightenment

## Richard Ziegler

For Merlin, the war with Germany was a million miles away. But Germans were just next-door. Many German-speaking families moved to Nebraska, especially around Harlan County.

Back in Stamford, Merlin reconnected with an old friend, Richard Ziegler, whose father was from Germany.<sup>24</sup> Richard and Merlin were both 23, bachelors, and living at home with their parents. But they had big ideas.

In the fall of 1916, the two young men traveled 400 miles, to attend the Highland Park College in Des Moines, Iowa.<sup>25</sup>

Merlin wanted to become an electrical engineer, which would require one year of school. Merlin rented a room in a house. His hosts, Mr. and Mrs. Bixby, were famous for throwing parties. They celebrated holidays like Halloween<sup>26</sup> and observed parties on the birthdays<sup>27</sup> of famous<sup>28</sup> presidents.<sup>29</sup>

Halfway through his freshman year, Merlin surprised everyone when he joined the cross-country team and immediately stood out from the pack. One sports writer described Merlin as first among “unknowns who are said to be dangerous.”<sup>30</sup>

It turned out, he was. The Des Moines Register wrote:

The first annual cross-country run in which the six departments of Highland Park college participated yesterday afternoon, resulted in several surprises. Palmer, a first year man, completely

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<sup>24</sup> 1916.02.18 Harlan County Journal

<sup>25</sup> 1916.09.01 Harlan County Journal

<sup>26</sup> 1916.10.28 Des Moines Register

<sup>27</sup> 1916.02.08 Des Moines Tribune

<sup>28</sup> 1917.04.17 Des Moines Tribune

<sup>29</sup> 1917.01.28 Des Moines Register

<sup>30</sup> 1917.03.23 Des Moines Register

unknown, stepped into the limelight by winning the two and a half mile jaunt easily with fifty yards to spare...<sup>31</sup>

According to the paper, Merlin got a little help from his friends. He sprinted far out ahead of everyone at the beginning, and let his friends trick the other runners into going on a wild goose chase a quarter mile in the wrong direction.<sup>32</sup> It worked! The 1917 yearbook identifies Merlin Palmer as the winner of the cross-country run.<sup>33</sup>

## The Great War

Merlin was slated to run again in just a few weeks, but another race was just beginning. On April 2, 1917, Woodrow Wilson gave a speech he promised he would never give. He asked Congress to declare war on Germany:

It is a war against all nations. American ships have been sunk, American lives taken, in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of, but the ships and people of other neutral and friendly nations have been sunk and overwhelmed in the waters in the same way. There has been no discrimination. The challenge is to all mankind.<sup>34</sup>

Merlin ran in his next race, handily winning the mile run, no tricks this time. In the half-mile race, he earned second place, but only due to his "inexperience."<sup>35</sup> Merlin could run fast, but the war was catching up with him.

On June 5, 1917, Merlin registered for the draft:

Name in full: Merlin Elmer Palmer.  
Age in years: 24.  
Home address: 3420 Fourth Street, Des Moines, Iowa.  
What is your present trade, occupation, or office? Student (Electr. Eng.)  
By whom employed? Highland Park College.  
Have a father, mother, wife, child under 12, or sister or brother under 12, solely dependent on you for support? No.  
Married or single? Single.  
Do you claim exception from draft? No.  
Tall, medium, or short? Medium.

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<sup>31</sup> 1917.03.24 Des Moines Register

<sup>32</sup> 1917.03.24 Des Moines Register

<sup>33</sup> 1917 Highland Park College - The Piper

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/address-to-congress-declaration-of-war-against-germany#transcript>

<sup>35</sup> 1917.04.14 Des Moines Register

Slender, medium, or stout? Medium.

Color of eyes? Grey.

Color of hair? Brown.

Bald? No.

I affirm that I have verified above answers and that they are true. Merlin Elmer Palmer.<sup>36</sup>

As 1917 came to a close, the looming danger of the draft cast a shadow over what should have been an exciting time in Merlin's life. He completed his studies and became a bona fide electrical engineer. The November 1, 1917, Riverton Review wrote:

M.E. Palmer, formerly of Alma, is the electrician hired by the city to care for the lines and wiring in town. He is highly recommended as an electrician and will be welcomed by all to the city.<sup>37</sup>

## Merlin Enlists

But this dreams would get cut short. Merlin's background as a star athlete, who could run quickly, and as an experienced rifleman, hunting ducks in Alaska, made him exactly what Uncle Sam was looking for.

On February 13, 1918, one day before his 25th birthday, Merlin Elmer Palmer enlisted in the United States Marine Corps.<sup>38</sup> Merlin reported to Paris Island, South Carolina, where he spent eight weeks training. According to a Marine Corps history:

The first three weeks were devoted to instruction and practice of close order drill, physical exercise, swimming, bayonet fighting, personal combat, wall scaling, and rope climbing. During the fourth and fifth weeks, recruits perfected their drills, learned boxing and wrestling, and were taught interior guard duties. The last three weeks were dedicated to marksmanship.<sup>39</sup>

In April 1918, Merlin said farewell to the United States, and set course for France aboard the USS Henderson. Private Palmer was going to war.

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<sup>36</sup> 1917.06.05 Merlin Elmer Palmer Registration.jpg

<sup>37</sup> 1917.11.01 The Riverton Review

<sup>38</sup> 1918.02.13 National Archives USMC Group 127

<sup>39</sup> 100 Years of Making Marines, <https://www.mcrdpi.marines.mil/Portals/76/Docs/CentennialCelebrationBook/MCRDPI-history-book-2.pdf>. p. 42.

# CH 4. The Marines

Millions of Americans served in World War 1.<sup>40</sup> Some of their stories, we'll never know. They're lost to the fog of war, memories buried on the battlefield. But thanks to one man, we have a firsthand account of Merlin Palmer's service. Private Arch G. Lyle attended training with Merlin Palmer, and both young men were assigned to the 17th Company, of the 1st Brigade, of the 5th Regiment of Marines. and the two young men became fast friends.

In a letter back home, Arch described crossing the Atlantic, and arriving at the western-most port in France.

ARCH G. LYLE: Dear Mother and Father: I got off the transport Henderson at Brest, France, on May 6th and went to an old barracks that was use by Napoleon as a mobilization camp. It was everything but a "rest" camp. We were drilled there for some time and then went back to Brest ...We entrained for "nobody knew where" - But we had a "hunch" that we were headed for the front. Then we were loaded on trucks and started for the front lines. We could hear the big guns booming... and they kept getting louder all the while.

## Bellau Wood

The 17th Company was about to play an important role in a defining moment in Marine Corps history: The Battle of Bellau Wood.

ARCH G. LYLE: We hiked until about dark and then the shells began falling pretty close, but when we reached Regimental headquarters they stopped. At this point an officer told us: "Boys, you had just as well throw away your packs." We grumbled just a little and threw away every thing except a blanket and a few toilet articles. As soon as it got dark we started on again. Pretty soon the Boches began to shell the road we were on - that was my baptism by shell-fire. It was so dark and the woods so thick that we had to hold to each other's blankets. Palmer was next to me. He lost his helmet - that was the article we needed most - and could not find it.

About 1 o'clock in the morning they put us in a little hole just big enough for us to keep our heads down out of the way of bullets. Our captain, Blake, came along and said: "Boys your range of fire is just in front; the Boche is out there." My heart gave a jump or two. Just before daybreak the word was passed that the "Boche is advancing" and we began firing. You never heard such a noise. About 10 o'clock the French made an attack and were unable to hold them. They called for some Marines to help them. Palmer

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/collections/stars-and-stripes/articles-and-essays/a-world-at-war/american-expeditionary-forces/>

and I jumped out and went to their aid. When we got to the top of the hill we could see a gray mass coming across the field. We stopped them! Palmer and I were the only Marines who were not killed or wounded.

The 1st Lieutenant leading the 17th Company, former football star<sup>41</sup> Bert Baston, was shot through both legs while leading his men through the woods. Lieutenant Baston refused to be evacuated from the battlefield until his men were safe and in secure firing position.<sup>42</sup> The 17th Company continued the fight in the northern tip of Bellau Wood.<sup>43</sup>

The battle lasted weeks, but on June 26, 1918, the Allied Forces declared victory. The price was severe: nearly 10,000 Americans lost their lives, but America proved its resolve and fighting power.

ARCH G. LYLE: We stayed in the woods several days and were then sent to the extreme left of the same sector, next to the French. We were there eight days and never fired a shot. Here is where we spent July 4th, 1918. On July 8th we were released at Chateau-Thierry and went back to Sausy, where we rested until July 16, when we were loaded on trucks for Soissons and arrived there July 18th.

## Soissons

If Bellau Wood stopped the Germans in their tracks, Soissons was a chance to send them running. The battle held strategic importance, as Soissons sat only 100 miles away from Paris. The Germans only recently advanced to this position in the spring of 1918 — there were no trenches here, just wide open wheat fields. The battle began on July 18, 1918:

A German barrage hit while the Marines awaited the signal to move out, and the 1st Battalion's jump-off was briefly delayed as a result... The tired and hungry men were given no time to rest or organize before platoon leaders were blowing their whistles and shouting "Forward!" at 0435.<sup>44</sup>

The Marines advanced behind the shield of rolling barrage — a relatively new tactic developed just a few years earlier. Allied Forces ran through the battlefield at a steady pace, supported by a constant stream of artillery explosions directly ahead of them, blasting clouds of dirt high into the air, providing a visual shield all the way up until the

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<sup>41</sup> The 5th Marine Regiment Devil Dogs in World War 1: A History and Roster. by Michael A. Eggleston. Section "Those Who Served."

<sup>42</sup> A Few Good Men, by Ronald J. Brown. p. 33.

<sup>43</sup> A Few Good Men, by Ronald J. Brown. p. 33.

<sup>44</sup> A Few Good Men, by Ronald J. Brown. p. 53.

moment the Marines reached the German line to engage in face-to-face combat. Executing a rolling barrage took careful timing, to ensure Marines did not run into the rolling barrage, or fall back too far behind the protection of the rolling barrage.

A history by the U.S. Naval Institute describes what happened next:

The Allied artillery fire began as Turrill's Marines were deploying, and the Germans answered with their own barrage. The battalion endured the shelling for about 30 minutes, and then went forward. Without machine guns, the attack was made with rifles, bayonets, and automatic rifles.<sup>45</sup>

ARCH G. LYLE: Here is where we struck the big blow at the Huns and saved Rheims. The French asked for all the troops America had, and they picked us out to break the German line. Well, we broke it, and it is said we did some damage to several Huns. We took a thousand or more prisoners.

In the victory at Soissons, the 17th Company liberated the village of Chaudan. A member of the 17th Company, Albert Newlove, wrote back home:

Dear Mother: Most of the Germans are young kids and seem to be glad to be taken as prisoners. Don't see how they can last much longer the way they have been getting licked lately.<sup>46</sup>

For the first time in four long years of war, the Germans were on the run.

## St. Miehle

ARCH G. LYLE: We were relieved on July 21st and were kept on the move every day until August 18th, when we hit them again at St. Miehle and Thiaucourt.

But just because the Germans were retreating, didn't mean they weren't putting up a fight. The German strategy was to retreat slowly, but to exact as much damage on the Allies as possible. The Germans thought that staggering death tolls might discourage the Allies from pressing on, pushing them to accept a peace treaty favorable to the Germans. For the rest of the war, the German lead a slow retreat, but would make the Allies pay for every inch of it.

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2005/december/leathernecks-soissons>

<sup>46</sup> <https://fromthepage.com/castatelibrary/world-war-i-collection/newlove/display/520808>

## **Mont Blanc**

October 1918. Mont Blanc, France. This is the Champagne region, famous for sprawling vineyards, used to make the beverage that carries its name. But in World War 1, it looks like hell.

From the top of Mont Blanc, only 200 meters high, the Germans can see for miles over gentle rolling hillside. It was like the landscape around Nebraska, twisted into something awful and horrifying.

So many Frenchmen died trying to take this hill early in the war, that France simply abandoned it, allowing the German Army four years of unchecked digging, and building more elaborate defenses. Several rows of trenches cascade down the hill, supported by concrete blockhouses, nicknamed "pillboxes." Between the trenches, in No Man's Land, the Germans strung barbed wire everywhere, save for the few strategic spots they leave open. Machine gun nests sit hidden inside patches of woods. The whole earth is scorched, exposing the white, chalky soil that gives Mont Blanc its name.

The Germans are so protected behind the top of the hill, that they built a cemetery, with monuments, and dug elaborate, fortified underground lares. Behind the German line sits the French village of St. Etienne, under occupation nearly the entire war.

Over the summer, the Marines have had the benefit of fighting the Germans on open fields, out-maneuvering them each step of the way. But here, at Mont Blanc, the Germans have every advantage.

## **Essen Hook**

Merlin and Arch, and the rest of the 17th Company, were assigned to combat on the first day of the battle: October 3, 1918. They were part of a miles-wide enormous wave, with two American battalions in the center, and a French battalion on each side, that would steadily climb the hill, through barbed wire, trenches, and merciless artillery and machine gun fire.

On the far left of the battlefield, near the French jumping off point, sat the first German trench, one that snaked around a hill, called the Essen Hook. As the Allies began their assault, the French on the left side of the 17th Company failed to advance, exposing the Marine flank to heavy fire from the Essen Hook. The 17th Company received

battlefield orders to take out the Essen Hook. Retired Marine Corps officers Peter F. Owen and John Swift described the assault in their article, *a Hideous Price: The 4th Brigade at Mont Blanc*:

The 17th Company moved by the left flank at 0700. When the company advanced to within 800m of the hook, German machine gun fire stopped its advance... The machine gunners suppressed the objective while Captain Hunt developed the situation... With the crew's skillful fires, four enemy machine guns were destroyed. The 17th Company advanced by fire and maneuver to within 300m of the strongpoint and prepared for a final assault. Captain Hunt ordered two platoons to support the attack by enveloping each flank... The other two platoons would conduct a frontal attack. With the aid of an attached machine gun team, the enveloping platoons advanced within 200m of the enemy strongpoint. Captain Hunt was prepared to order the frontal assault when, quite unexpectedly, the German defenders capitulated... More than 100 Germans surrendered.<sup>47</sup>

The 17th Company seized the Essen Hook for the Allies, and turned it over the French, who quickly lost it. The 17th Company would re-capture the Essen Hook later the same day.

The fighting continued through night of October 3rd in the dark, as desperate, thirsty soldiers attempted to gain control of a hillside water tower.<sup>48</sup>

## **Trapped**

October 3rd had its challenges. But the next day, October 4, 1918 would go down in history as the worst day of casualties for the Marines of the entire war.

In the morning, the 17th Company sat in Reserve along with the rest of the 1st Battalion. They'd started the fighting the day before, and this was their chance to rest. They would watch the 3rd Battalion launch the attack, with the 2nd Battalion at the ready to support.

At the allotted time, the 3rd Battalion jumped into the battle. But, due to poor communication, they had no rolling barrage in front of them for support. The Marines ran, unprotected, but unchallenged by the enemy. It was a trap. As Ronald J. Brown, author of *A Few Good Men: The Fighting Fifth Marines*, describes it:

They drove only a narrow wedge into the German lines before being stopped cold by fire from three sides: Ludwig's Rucken to the

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<sup>47</sup> *A Hideous Price*, by Lieutenant Colonel Peter F. Owen (RET USMC), and Lieutenant Colonel John Swift (RET USMC), p. 28.

<sup>48</sup> *Blanc Mont Ridge, America's Forgotten Victory*, by Romain Cansière and Ed Gilbert. p. 60.

front, Blanc Mont Ridge to the left rear, and Petersburg Hill on the left flank. Machine-gun fire and a mix of high-explosive and gas shells simultaneously hit the assault force.<sup>49</sup>

The 2nd Battalion entered the battle to support the pinned down 3rd Battalion. No one has studied this moment more than historian James Gregory Jr., who wrote about it in his article, *A Calamity of Errors*:

The Marines of 2d Battalion found themselves in an equally dire predicament as they moved up to the 3d Battalion. ...The failure of headquarters to provide air support allowed the Germans to control the skies. German aviators flew low, using their machine guns to good effect against the Marines. They also dropped numerous hand bombs on the attacking force. This constant harassment forced the 23d Machine Gun Company, attached to the 2d Battalion, 5th Regiment, to keep busy engaging the planes instead of the attackers that surrounded them.<sup>50</sup>

Private First Class William A. Francis, in the 3rd Battalion, described it:

We were afraid that the Germans were going to close in together in the rear and cut us off from our lines. We fought desperately to keep the Germans from carrying out their plans. We were on a prairie with machine gun bullets hitting all around. They were hitting only inches from me on each side, and knocking dirt into my face...<sup>51</sup>

## Retreat

Among the Marines of 2nd Battalion was Captain DeWitt Peck, who was shot in the neck while trying to support the struggling 3rd Battalion. Under staggering casualties, and exposed to the German's punishing firepower, Captain Peck ordered the only known Marine retreat of World War 1.

As the beleaguered 3rd battalion slowly fell back, and mingled among the 2nd battalion, witnesses observed members of both groups—including officers—begin a haphazard run for the back. As James Gregory Jr. describes it:

This collapse of both battalions led to a disorganized retreat of the Marines."<sup>52</sup>

As Arch G. Lyle described it:

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<sup>49</sup> *A Few Good Men*, by Ronald J. Brown. p. 68.

<sup>50</sup> *A Calamity of Errors*, James Gregory Jr, p. 29

<sup>51</sup> *The Doughboys: America and the First World War*, by Gary Mead. p. 315.

<sup>52</sup> *A Calamity of Errors*, James Gregory Jr, p. 30.

ARCH G. LYLE: They fought hard and many good men were killed. We advanced about four miles. The French who were on our left, did not advance and this left us in a bad position. The Huns were firing on us from both sides and the front and we were forced to retire.

On the hillside, even the Germans could see the chaotic retreat happening below.<sup>53</sup> As Marines of the 2nd and 3rd Battalion began fleeing to the back, they encountered the commander of the 1st Battalion, Major George W. Hamilton, who greeted them by pulling his pistol and pointing it directly at the retreaters. He restored order and shored up the line. Now all three battalions were engaged in the battle.<sup>54</sup>

Ronald J. Brown, writing in *A Few Good Men*:

Captain Hunt's 17th Company cleared a lane through the German lines to the besieged battalions by midafternoon. This action, conducted under withering enemy fire, stabilized the front line and stopped a potential disaster. Still, things were not going well and casualties were high. All three battalions were reduced to less than half strength as they manned a thin line in a small wooded rectangle known as "the Box," which was under constant enemy fire as night fell.<sup>55</sup>

"The Box" became infamous, a shorthand way of describing the deadly position of being fired upon from all sides, and even by German planes above.

The Marine's losses were staggering. On October 4, Merlin's 5th Regiment of Marines lost 60% of its strength — 61 dead officers, and over a thousand dead enlisted men.<sup>56</sup> As Merlin's own captain, Leroy P. Hunt said later,

The afternoon of the 4th of October, 1918 was by far the bloodiest and worst day of the entire war.<sup>57</sup>

## **Worst Fears**

It was at this moment that Arch's worst fears came true.

ARCH G. LYLE: In about an hour an airship discovered our range and I never saw such a display of artillery. Palmer was sitting by my

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<sup>53</sup> A Calamity of Errors James Gregory Jr., p. 39

<sup>54</sup> A Calamity of Errors James Gregory Jr., p. 31

<sup>55</sup> A Few Good Men, by Ronald J. Brown. p. 68.

<sup>56</sup> A Few Good Men, by Ronald J. Brown. p. 70.

<sup>57</sup> Blanc Mont Ridge, America's Forgotten Victory, by Romain Cansière and Ed Gilbert. p. 5.

side when a large shell struck nearby. It tore his head to pieces and he fell into my arms and died.

ARCH G. LYLE: About twenty minutes later another shell buried Duncan under about five feet of dirt. I grabbed a shovel and dug him out and a doctor worked over him, but he never regained consciousness.

Arch called Palmer and Duncan “the best friends I ever had.” But there was no time for burial or honors. The battle swirled around him, unceasing, uninterrupted. With no time to mourn, Arch G. Lyle said goodbye to his friends forever, and continued the fight.

The battle wasn’t over — far from it. It was the single bloodiest day of World War 1 for the Marines, but they showed no signs of stopping. The writing was on the wall. That night, the German Kaiser Wilhelm sat down, and drafted his terms of surrender.

# CH 5. Bad News

## Back in Wrangell

By 1918, Orville Palmer ran the electric powerhouse by himself.<sup>58</sup> He took his family on vacation to Stamford in April 1918, missing his chance to see Merlin by two months. Orville and his family made sure to be back in Wrangell by the 4th of July.

While Merlin spent a quiet Independence Day by the side of a road in France, Wrangell's 4th of July celebration took on a somber tone. The Wrangell Sentinel wrote:

Flags of the Allies were mingled conspicuously with the flags of our own country... Closely interwoven with the joyousness of the occasion were touches of pathos,—the feeling that while we celebrate the fact that liberty was won in the long ago, the possession of it is menaced by a ruthless enemy at the present time and no one knows how much of our future will elapse before a secure and honorable peace is ours once more...<sup>59</sup>

Instead of awarding the usual money prizes for street games, winners received war saving stamps.<sup>60</sup> Wrangell raised and donated \$315.60 to the American Red Cross.<sup>61</sup>

## Herbert

As news of the victories in Europe reached America in the summer of 1918, the public celebrated. The Marine Corps, a formerly little known support unit, became celebrities, hailed as elite battlefield warriors.

But a new enemy was striking down both sides. Just two-hundred miles away from Stamford sat Fort Riley, Kansas. In March 1918, the first documented case of Spanish Influenza appeared here, in a cook named Albert Gitchell. The disease found its way to the front lines and around the world, killing millions.

No one was spared. At the end of October 1918, as Orville eagerly awaited news from Merlin, he received the shocking news that his brother, Herbert, Herbert's 3-year old

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<sup>58</sup> 1914.01.15 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

<sup>59</sup> 1918.07.11 Wrangell Sentinel.pdf

<sup>60</sup> 1918.07.11 Wrangell Sentinel.pdf

<sup>61</sup> 1918.07.11 Wrangell Sentinel.pdf

son, and Herbert's mother-in-law,<sup>62</sup> all died of Spanish Influenza in the same home.<sup>63</sup> Many in Wrangell remembered Herbert from his days at the powerhouse, and mourned the loss alongside Orville.

## Armistice

At 2pm, on Monday, November 11, 1918, long awaited good news arrived in Wrangell over the telegraph wire: The war was over. The Allies won.

The school bell began the celebration, and students were dismissed for the day. The Wrangell Sentinel wrote:

Meanwhile other bells, church bells, fire bells and Government school bell were ringing joyfully and the whistles from the Columbia and Northern, the shingle mill, the cannery and the Standard Oil were taking a prominent part in the general outbreak of joy... Dignified business men threw their hats into mid-air, shouted, clasped hands and even executed jig-steps in their enthusiasm... A procession was hastily formed during the afternoon and a victory parade went up and down the streets... A torch procession was announced to take place in the evening... In the lead was the Bjorge car, properly decorated, a drum corps, and citizens carrying torches, lanterns or flags.<sup>64</sup>

## Notice

Orville may have thought this meant Merlin was coming home. But news arrived three days later which shattered all that. The Wrangell Sentinel wrote:

Word was received here last night by O. C. Palmer that his youngest brother, Merlin Palmer, a member of the U. S. Marines, was killed in action about a month ago. Merlin Palmer was well known in Wrangell, having left here only about three years ago.<sup>65</sup>

It was a stunning, tragic turn for the Palmers, who had already lost so much.

Stamford, Nebraska mourned its native son at a church memorial and by lowering its flag to half-mast.<sup>66</sup> The Stamford Star wrote:

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<sup>62</sup> 1918.10.31 Boulder Daily Camera

<sup>63</sup> 1918.10.18 Boulder Daily Camera

<sup>64</sup> 1918.11.14 Wrangell Sentinel.pdf

<sup>65</sup> 1918.11.14 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

<sup>66</sup> 1918.11.22 The Alma Record

Merlin Palmer was one of the most popular young men of the Stamford neighborhood, where he grew to manhood. He had a host of friends here who will join in extending their heartfelt sympathy to the bereaved father and other relatives.<sup>67</sup>

**The official notice from Washington, sent to Merlin's aging father, read:**

Judson A. Palmer: Deeply regret to inform you that message from abroad states Private Merlin Elmer Palmer, marine corps, was killed in action October 4. No particulars are available, but see general information mailed to you today. Accept my heartiest sympathy in your loss of the one who nobly gave his life in the service of his country. CHARLES G. LONG, Brigadier General.<sup>68</sup>

**In reply, Judson Palmer wrote to the Marines, asking for information about his son's death. In January 1919, he received a letter from Germany. It was written by a man named Arch G. Lyle, who said he knew Merlin, served with him, and considered him a friend. Arch wrote:**

ARCH G. LYLE: As I was a special friend of Merlin's the clerk referred the matter to me. I was with Merlin at the time of his death, and I know that there was absolutely no suffering as he was killed instantly. We were in a small hole together... where we had made an attack on October 4. We were under heavy shell fire...

I am very sorry to state that I have no way of knowing the exact location of Merlin's grave as he was buried on the field. I am glad to say that I was a good friend of Merlin's. We had been together always from the time we enlisted until his death. He was a good Christian boy and a good soldier, and set a good example to all his associates... I am, Yours sincerely, ARCH G. LYLE.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> 1918.11.22 The Alma Record

<sup>68</sup> 1918.11.22 The Alma Record

<sup>69</sup> 1919.03.13 Wrangell Sentinel clipping.png

# CH 6. The Veterans

## Old Friends

Merlin Palmer's life is told through the old friends he kept, and the new friends he made. Those who knew him, liked him. While Merlin died at the age of 25, many of his friends lived to ripe old age.

Back in the fall of 1917, the US Navy rejected Richard Ziegler's application due to an unknown "physical disability." But a few months later, the United States needed every man it could get. Richard was assigned to service in the "spruce division" of the aviation corp in Vancouver, Washington.<sup>70</sup> He retired in 1919 as Sergeant Major Richard Ziegler.<sup>71</sup> He married and had two children. Richard Ziegler died in 1971 at the age of 78.

After the war was over, Arch G. Lyle and the 5th Marines occupied Germany to ensure the armistice took hold. He wrote about the lonesomeness he felt following the death of his comrades:

ARCH G. LYLE: I had to come to France and fight and suffer to have my eyes opened and they have been opened, too. There is nothing that will open them like the dead, dying, suffering and wounded on the battlefield. All my friends are killed. I am left alone among strangers in a strange land and have to make friends with Belgians, French and Germans. Yes, I have friends among them too. They do not hate us as would be supposed but do anything to make us comfortable in every way.<sup>72</sup>

His service at Mont Blanc distinguished him, earning a Silver Star Citation<sup>73</sup> from the President of the United States, and the medal Croix de Guerre<sup>74</sup> from France. After the war, Arch G. Lyle moved back to his home of Virginia, married, and had a daughter who grew up to marry a Marine like her dad. Arch G. Lyle died in 1969 at the age of 72.

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<sup>70</sup> 1919.02.21 Alma Record

<sup>71</sup> 1919.02.21 Alma Record

<sup>72</sup> 1919.02.07 Staunton Daily Leader.pdf

<sup>73</sup> Hall of Valor Project Arch G Lyle

<sup>74</sup> Hall of Valor Project Arch G Lyle

## The Legion Forms

In the months after the war, Arch G. Lyle was just one of thousands of American veterans of the largest, bloodiest war in human history. Their lives were changed forever. As they awaited the slow boat home, they began organizing.

On March 15, 1919, over one thousand<sup>75</sup> American veterans formed the Paris Caucus. After considering different names for the group, like the Liberty League and Veterans of the Great War, they settled on a name: The American Legion. According to the American Legion's website:

...The Legion evolved from a group of war-weary veterans of World War I into one of the most influential nonprofit groups in the United States. Membership swiftly grew to over 1 million, and local posts sprang up across the country.<sup>76</sup>

## Wrangell Legion

On a cold, December Day in 1919, veterans gathered at the Wrangell Hotel with a mission. Together, they founded Wrangell's chapter of the American Legion. When the subject of a namesake for the group came up, they took a vote. It was unanimous. The Wrangell Sentinel wrote:

...It was voted that the Wrangell organization should be known as Merlin Elmer Palmer Post. Merlin Elmer Palmer made the supreme sacrifice "Somewhere in France"... He was not enlisted from Wrangell, but being identified with the town, and having died a hero on foreign soil, the organizers of the local post were unanimous in wishing to honor his memory by naming the local post for him... It was Merlin Palmer's intention, had he lived, to return to Wrangell as soon as the war was over.<sup>77</sup>

## Orville Moves On

For Orville Palmer, having his brother's name affixed to Wrangell's American Legion Post was a recognition of the legacy of the Palmer brothers in Wrangell. Even in their darkest moments, the Palmers brought light to Wrangell. When Orville announced they were moving away six years later, the Wrangell Sentinel wrote:

It is a distinct loss to Wrangell to lose such a public spirited family from the community...<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> The Paris Caucus | The American Legion Centennial Celebration. <https://centennial.legion.org/alabama/post11/1919/03/15/first-caucus-american-legion-paris-france-1919>

<sup>76</sup> History | The American Legion. <https://www.legion.org/idaho/history>

<sup>77</sup> 1919.12.18 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

<sup>78</sup> 1924.08.14 Wrangell Sentinel

The Palmers were gone, but Merlin's name stayed behind. Orville Palmer lived to the age of 77, passing away in 1954. No one served as more of a role model and guiding light to Merlin than his big brother Orville.

## **Stamford Legion**

In 1920, sixteen World War 1 veterans gathered in Stamford, Nebraska to form a post of the American Legion. They confronted the question, who to name it after? They picked one of their own: Merlin Palmer. Today, there are over 12,000 American Legion posts across the country,<sup>79</sup> and two are named for the same Nebraska farmboy whose life was cut short on the battlefields of France.

Wrangell, Alaska and Stamford, Nebraska are nearly two-thousand miles apart, but there's a lot in common. They're small towns, far off the beaten path, where families carry on traditions going back generations. And if you look at photos of the 4th of July in either place, you'll see a group of veterans, carrying the flags of the United States Armed Forces. And among the flags, you'll see one for the American Legion in the middle, bearing the name of Merlin Palmer. His legacy shines on.

I'm your host, Ronan Rooney. Thanks for listening. Goodnight.

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<sup>79</sup> <https://www.legion.org/presscenter/about>

# Credits

Wrangell History Unlocked is written and produced by Ronan Rooney. Check out our website for today's episode at [wrangellhistoryunlocked.com/palmer](http://wrangellhistoryunlocked.com/palmer). You can see pictures, news clippings, and read a transcript of today's episode.

Thanks to Mary Rooney for performing the Nebraska state song, Beautiful Nebraska, on piano for us.

Thanks to John Schenk for making the promotional trailer for this episode.

Thanks to Tyler Naab for being the voice of Arch G. Lyle.

Sound effects and music from [epidemicsound.com](http://epidemicsound.com), with additional music from the Wikipedia Commons.

Thanks to Alice Rooney and Vivian Faith Prescott, PhD, MFA, MA, for reading and consulting on the transcript for this episode. Thanks to Robert Palmer and Bob Rees, descendants of Merlin's siblings, for so kindly sharing some of their family history.

Thanks to Rena Conner and the Facebook community group, Stamford Nebraska -125th & Beyond, for getting me in contact with the good people of Stamford.

From Alaska to Nebraska, thanks to the American Legion posts for over a hundred years of service to your communities.

If you're interested in learning more about the Marines at Blanc Mont, please check out these scholars whose research appears in this episode:

- A Few Good Men: The Fighting Fifth Marines. By Ronald J. Brown, US Marine Corps, Retired.
- A Hideous Price: The 4th Brigade at Blanc Mont. by Peter F. Owen and John Swift, US Marine Corps, Retired.
- The 5th Marine Regiment Devil Dogs in World War 1 by Michael A. Eggleston, US Army, Retired.
- "A Calamity of Errors: The Untold Story of the 5th Regiment at Blanc Mont Ridge on 4 October 1918" by James Gregory Jr.
- Blanc Mont Ridge 1918: America's Forgotten Victory, by Romaine Cansière and Ed Gilbert.

Thanks to all the veterans who served. If you've never been to Wrangell for the 4th of July, come sometime! From all of us here at Wrangell History Unlocked, thanks for listening.