

ELMER BUTLER



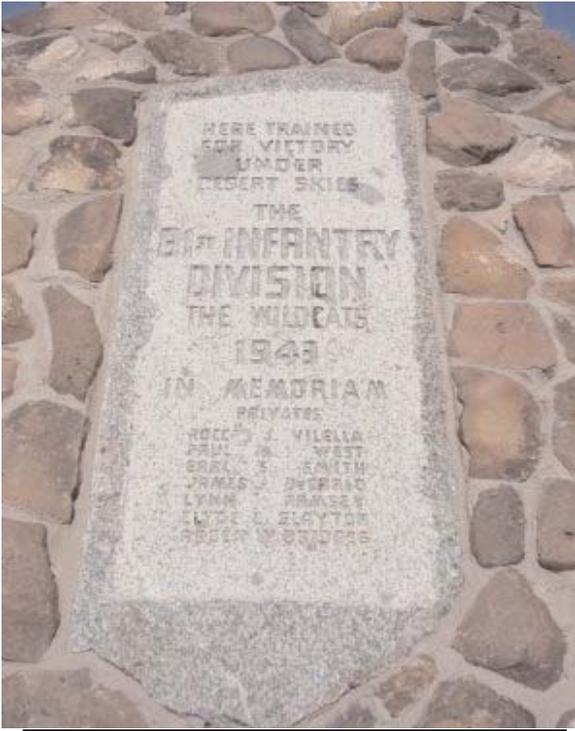
Elmer Butler was drafted into the US Army on 30 May 1942. He was sent to Camp Rucker Alabama for Basic Training. Basic Training was a fast process for Elmer, and for many during this time in the war. While at basic, he was assigned to the 81st Infantry Division, the "Wildcat" Division. The division was formed at Rucker in June 1942. They trained at Rucker until March 1943

After a short training in southern Alabama and northern Florida, Elmer and the 81st were sent to Tennessee for maneuvers in the Ozarks Mountains. The Tennessee Maneuvers were a huge undertaking by the Army to train the men for life in the field overseas. Around 200,000 men are said to have been involved in the "war games" that were held in Tennessee during 1943. Elmer trekked through fields, and mountains on these maneuvers. They practiced simulated assaults, and escape and evasion tactics. As noted in the division's history book from 1945, "The maneuvers extended from mid-April to the end of June, giving the men experience in enduring combat conditions over extended periods of time and under adverse weather conditions."



Patch of the 81st "Wildcat" Division

On 25 June, 1943 Butler was sent to Arizona for desert training. It took around 70 train loads to move the entire 81st Division to Arizona for Desert Maneuvers. The full division arrived complete by 6 July. They were preparing for the prolonged engagement in the Africa Desert. They arrived to a city of tents in the middle of the desert, called Camp Horn.



81st Division Memorial in Arizona.

He was positioned between Yuma and Phoenix Arizona. In July the desert had 130 degree heat which dehydrated the men easily. They needed to carry and take salt tablets and water to help keep salt in the body. The overwhelming heat took its toll on the men. Some of the men in the 81st died from the training. A memorial was dedicated to them on 24 November 1943.

While in Arizona for maneuvers, Elmer completed a week long march in full gear. Because of the hazards of the sun, and the sand the men had to wear their coats to protect them. This increased the chances of heat stroke and dehydration. They would stop and camp as they were allowed, finding comfort in bushes or where ever that offered some shade and tranquility. They would be able to get about 4 hours of sleep, before packing up and moving again. At one of their campsites, Elmer recalls the entire time was spent killing rattlesnakes, and they didn't get any sleep. An ambulance followed them through most all exercises to help those men that collapsed.

Soon, the Desert training became obsolete as the war in Africa had come to a close, and the Army decided they would not need to send more troops there. Upon completion of desert training in November 1943, Elmer was sent to Camp San Luis Obispo near the California coast. Shortly after arriving, Butler was granted leave and he returned to Willmar.



Elmer and Olive on their Wedding Day

On 27 December 1943 Butler married Olive Johnson from the Willmar area. Olive had two brothers serving in the Army at the time and both were overseas already. Fredolph was serving in the Central Pacific area of Operations, and Freddie was serving in the Sicilian/Italian campaign. Freddie would die in combat on 25 January 1944.

The morning after their wedding, they took a train to Minneapolis and Olive watched her new husband load a train to return to San Luis Obispo California to train for amphibious landings with the Marine Corps. It was apparent to them that Elmer would be going to the Pacific.

In California, the Army's plan was to combine an effective training regimen with a variety of facilities for relaxation and recreation. They felt this location would offer a welcome opportunity for the men of the 81st after over 8 months of continuous life in the field.

In California, Elmer caught up with a person from his past. While at a USO club, Elmer met his fourth grade teacher working there. The woman was looking through the roster of men, and noticed his name. She said it rang a bell for her, but couldn't quite place it. It took thie some time to figure out the connection, but it eventually came to them.

In California, during the amphibious training, a program was introduced to make all members of the 81st a swimmer. Also, the landing exercises brought them men to San Clemente Island. They would pull up in their landing craft and storm the beach. After securing, they would pull out and run the exercise again.

In May 1944, they moved to Camp Beale for some fine tuning of their training, and a review by General George C Marshall, US Army Chief of Staff. Marshall inspected the phases of their training, and addressed the officers and non-commissioned officers of the Division.

On 30 June the division moved to Camp Stoneman, which was their port of embarkation. On 2 July, they were on the ship USS Monterey, enroute for the Pacific.

On 11 June they arrived in Hawaii at Fort Hase. In Hawaii they began climatizing the men, trying to get them used to the tropical climate. They were put through an extensive jungle warfare training at the Army's Jungle Training Center. They also practiced further amphibious landings to prepare for the upcoming amphibious operations.



General George C Marshall



USS Harris

On 12 August 1944 Elmer and the men of the 81st boarded the USS Harris and set sail for the Western Pacific. After 12 days aboard ship, they landed at Cape Esperance on Guadalcanal. The fierce battle on Guadalcanal was over by the time that Elmer arrived, so he never saw any hostilities there. He did serve on patrols and guard duty. As the island was secure, Elmer's unit took the opportunity to run a final rehearsal of the coming assaults on the Angaur, Ulithi, and Peleliu.

Elements of the 81st were sent to take the small island of Angaur, while Elmer's unit, C Company, 306th Medical Battalion, was assigned to join the 323rd Regimental Combat Team on the Assault on the island of Ulithi. Originally, they were held in reserve, but were ordered to take Ulithi since the assault on Angaur was going so well.

Elmer and his unit arrived on Ulithi on 21 September 1944, unopposed. Elmer said that the island was "untouched" by war. After two days, 23 September, the island was officially declared secure. The Natives were scared of the Americans at first but later came to like and trust them, even eating with them. He noted that they lived like life was like 100 years prior. None of the regular technologies that Americans were accustomed to.

On one instance with the natives, Butler recalled a woman holding her child and pointing to his combat knife. She continued to point until he finally gave it to her reluctantly. A short time later she came back with a cut up coconut and motioned for him to drink and eat the meat. Cutting the coconut to share with him was what she wanted the knife for.

While Elmer was on Ulithi, and other members of the 81st were on Angaur, the First Marine Division assaulted the Island of Peleliu meeting heavy resistance. On 23 September, the 321st RCT went to Peleliu initiating an attack. Butler's group was sent in by mid October. They took continual mortar, machine gun, and sniper fire as they advanced across the island.

Butler arrived on Peleliu by landing craft. Getting off the craft, he stood in water up to his neck, and had to hold his weapon above his head as they walked their way to shore. The struggle didn't end for him when he arrived on the beach. They were under enemy fire immediately. Taking cover, they laid on the beach. One of the tanks on the beach was equipped with a loud speaker, and Butler and the others were informed to "Get off the beach!", the only ones on the beach were dead or going to die. They moved forward, until reaching the line of other Americans. At Peleliu, Elmer recalled that the incoming artillery and fire made the night sky light up like daylight.

Butler lived in combat for the next month or more, staying in foxholes, caves, and wherever they could take cover. Before moving from their positions, they held their helmets up to make sure no Japanese snipers were around. The division history notes, "Employing the LVT flamethrower, tanks, sandbag enplacements, pack howitzers, and supported by planes which attacked enemy positions with napalm fire bombs, troops seized one dominating terrain feature after another." The widespread devastation effectively destroyed the enemy on the island. The 81st Division lost 542 men killed, and 2,736 wounded. As Elmer served as a medic, he saw firsthand many of the wounded and helped to treat them.

It was during his time on Peleliu that Elmer found out that his daughter DiAnne was born. She was already a month old by the time he found out.

In mid-December 1944, Elmer and the 81st bore witness to another tragedy of their location. A typhoon hit the islands and caused considerable devastation to the area. Waves of over 30 feet high hit the islands and nearly consumed them. Five military ships succumbed to the storm, and a number of men drowned. Elmer took his gear, and tried to head for the high ground. When the storm was over, they were soon ready to move on in the Pacific.

In January 1945 he was pulled from the line and they were sent to New Caledonia for R&R, rest and relaxation. It was an eye opening



Elmer in New Caledonia

change to the battle hardened men of the 81st. Elmer recalled going to a large building for a hot meal. The tables inside were all set with white tablecloths and young girls to wait on them. One of Butler's friends commented, "I didn't know we were going to eat in heaven."

The 81st had the ability for rest and relaxation, but also had to take time to prepare for the next stages of the war. Replacement soldiers were integrated into the Division's units. They continued with jungle training, and more amphibious training.

By April, it was determined that the men were ready to go back into combat, and they were placed on alert status for immediate movement for the invasion of Okinawa. The success of the assault on Okinawa changed their orders and they were instead sent to Leyte on the Philippine Islands. On 3 May 1945, Elmer departed New Caledonia.



Olive and Elmer's Daughter DiAnne

Enroute to the Leyte, they encountered Japanese kamikazes. Elmer and the other troops were ordered into the holding area inside the ship. Although the attack could have had devastating effect on them, and Butler recalls "a lot of racket" no planes hit the ship. After a brief stop at Manus in the Admiralty Islands, they finished their travel to Leyte.

They arrived in the Philippines on 16 May 1945 meeting no resistance. Butler remembers a filipino boy coming up to him and telling him, "I'll carry your pack, you shoot." The locals knew where to find the Japanese on the island.

They met sporadic resistance on the Philippines, and were provided continued time for R & R and training. The war was coming to a close for Elmer and the US military. Japan was beginning to show some signs of defeat. He spent some time serving during the small skirmishes that they encountered and helping out in supply.

The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought the war to a close, and Japan surrendered days later. Elmer and his division were ready to sail to mainland Japan for the invasion, but with the surrender they instead were going to be serving as occupation duty.

After a short stop in Okinawa, they continued to Honshu Island. Butler recalls that it was essentially deserted. On the island, he was a witness to an earthquake. Elmer was upstairs in a barracks building when the quake happened. He heard a huge bang, and for a short time thought the Japanese had changed their mind on surrendering.



Butler, second from right, with some buddies while in Japan.

Elmer notes that he had an opportunity to leave after the war was over, as he had enough points to be discharged. But he felt that after traveling all that way, and having seen as many other countries and islands as he had, he might as well take some time to see Japan too.

In November 1945, Elmer's overseas service finally drew to a close. He boarded a ship to leave Japan and return to the US. As the ship was being pulled out of the harbor, a cord wrapped around the propeller of the tug boat pulling them out, and they were stuck. For 2 days they sat, waiting for a Navy diver to be flown out to clear the obstruction. Finally they were freed, and allowed to leave. After nine days aboard ship, Elmer landed in Tacoma Washington and was greeted by the Salvation Army for a homecoming. The Salvation Army brought with them donuts.

He took a bus to Fort Lewis and ate supper at 11:00. After supper he went to use the phone but the line was so long he instead got a day pass to go to his aunt Hilda's for the night. The following morning, he was sent to Fort McCoy Wisconsin to be discharged. He was discharged as a Technician 4th grade on 4 December 1944.



Army Good Conduct Medal awarded to Elmer Butler. Donated by his son, Jerry in October 2006.

After the war, Elmer returned to his wife and daughter, and built a home in Willmar. His family stayed at his mother's place while Elmer worked during the day, and personally built the house at night. In August 1946 they moved in.

He worked as a carpenter in the Willmar area, and raised three children. He retired in 1974.

In the 1980's Elmer read in the American Legion paper that many World War II veterans were getting medals all these years after the war. He had received a commendation from the division prior to leaving Japan, but had been thinking more about getting home so he just stuck it into his barracks bag and forgot about it. He decided to send in his information and see if they replied with anything.

On 22 May 1986, Elmer Butler received the Bronze Star for his service in the Army during actions on Peleliu.

Elmer passed away on 21 April 2000 in Willmar. He was 90 years old.



Elmer Butler's Army dress uniform, donated by his son, Jerry in October 2006.

