

Kenneth Pierce French Biography

Pre-WSC Years

Kenneth Pierce French was born on April 23, 1920 to Franklin and Ethel (Dorothy) Edwards French. He was baptized on May 7, 1922 at All Saints Episcopal Church in Spokane, Washington.¹ French's younger brother, Roland, was born in 1925. Franklin French moved his family to Pullman shortly after the birth of his first son, where he worked as a brakeman for the Spokane and Inland Empire Railway Company in Pullman.² The Spokane and Inland Empire Railway Company maintained a trolley-like electric railway, or 'interurban,' with overhead electric wires covering a north-south loop between Spokane and the Palouse from 1908 to 1943. The company went bankrupt after a head-on collision between two trains near Coeur d'Alene. Reviving briefly in the 1930s in Whitman County, they could no longer compete with diesel-electric locomotives, improved roadways, and the automobile, and closed soon after.³

Following the demise of the railroad, Franklin French graduated from Washington State College (WSC) in 1930 and taught foreign languages for the public schools in Pullman.⁴ He would later become one of the oldest non-professional soldiers in the United States Army during

¹ "Kenneth Pearce French in the Washington, Episcopal Diocese of Spokane Church Records, 1870-1947," *ancestry.com*, https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=61608&h=38913&tid=&pid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=ixh1230&_phstart=successSource (Accessed June 2, 2020).

² "1930 United States Federal Census for Kenneth French," *ancestry.com*, https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=6224&h=112942793&tid=&pid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=ixh1235&_phstart=successSource (Accessed June 2, 2020).

³ JoAnn Jones, "Nearby History: Transcontinental railroad companies wove web of branches across the Palouse," *Moscow-Pullman Daily News*, June 6, 2015, https://dnews.com/life/nearby-history-transcontinental-railroad-companies-wove-web-of-branches-across-the-palouse/article_52ecc684-6f60-53a2-b765-cf3b8e14915f.html (Accessed June 3, 2020).

⁴ "Time Lauds First Family of Education," *Powwow*, 1945, accessed via WSU Libraries Digital Collections, Washington State University Libraries' Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

World War II, achieving the rank of Sergeant and enrolling in archaeology classes at the University of Rome while stationed there in 1945.⁵

Kenneth French earned a spot in a local Pullman newspaper in the fall of 1936 for taking the lead in a contest sponsored by the Erb Hardware Company of Lewiston and the Glover Hardware store for pest killing. The article notes French was “leading the local field...having been swelled by credit for 27 coyotes...together with 63 magpie eggs, one rattlesnake, two porcupines and numerous squirrels, ground hogs, hawks and hawk eggs.”⁶ French graduated from Pullman High School in 1938.

WSC Experience

French attended Washington State College from 1938 to 1939 as a General Studies major. During the 1939 school year he was a pledge for Phi Sigma Kappa, a fraternity founded in the early 1870s by students at Massachusetts Agricultural College, now the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, in order to form a “society to promote morality, learning and social culture.”⁷ He was also a member of the 1939 WSC Rifle Team, which won thirty-six out of forty-three postal matches against college teams from across the United States.⁸ The 1940 United States Federal Census shows French worked for a confectionary company. French also listed his occupation as an actor on his Army enlistment paperwork.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “Pullman Boys After Pest Killing Prizes,” *Pullman Herald*, April 24, 1936, via Wallis and Marilyn Kimble Northwest History Database, at Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc> (Accessed June 8, 2020).

⁷ “Phi Sigma Kappa History,” *phisigmakappa.org*, <https://phisigmakappa.org/about/history/> (Accessed June 8, 2020).

⁸ “Rifle Team Expects Favorable Season,” *The Evergreen*, October 11, 1939, in WSU 1, WSU Publications: Evergreens <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc/finders/wsupubslst.htm> at Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc> (Accessed June 8, 2020).

Military Experience and Death

French enlisted in the Washington National Guard as a Sergeant on September 16, 1940, the same day that President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Selective Service Act and National Guard units were activated into federal service.⁹ He was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the 3rd battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division in June 1941 at Fort Lewis, Washington.¹⁰ By the end of 1940, the 161st had a long history in Washington, first as a state guard then as a National Guard unit serving both overseas and in the defense of contested U.S. borders.¹¹ Those who served went through a three-week training period in the summertime, but in the fall of 1940 the unit was activated for an extended twelve month period for “concentrated, vigorous training” in order to transform into an “effective fighting unit.”¹² Few if any exemptions were given to college students, which explains why French didn’t return to WSC. In September of 1941, the unit’s twelve-month training period extended to eighteen months.

On October 24, 1941, the 161st Infantry received orders they would be headed to the Philippines by December 17. They heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor during their journey to San Francisco, and instead of going to the Philippines the 161st arrived in Honolulu, Hawaii on December 21, 1941.¹³ The 161st helped fortify the island of Oahu against potential Japanese attack as well as enforced martial law, approved by President Roosevelt on December 9, 1941. During his time in Hawaii, French met Ruth Kanahale, a stenographer working at Bellows

⁹ “Kenneth P French in the U.S., World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946,” *Ancestry.com*, https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?dbid=8939&h=5157171&indiv=try&o_vc=Record:OtherRecord&rhSource=2442 (Accessed June 9, 2020).

¹⁰ “Spokane Noncoms Given Commissions,” *Spokane Chronicle*, July 28, 1941.

¹¹ Laura Briere, “A History of Washington State’s 161st Infantry Regiment, 1940-1945: The Edwin G. Park Project,” pg. 13.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

Field.¹⁴ A newspaper caption reveals French found his “one and only” during his stay in the Hawaiian islands, and Ruth wrote to her prospective mother-in-law that she had “very deep faith that he will return safely to you.”¹⁵

Toward the end of 1942, a stalemate developed on Guadalcanal and the 25th Division sailed to Australia in December for pre-combat training. However, they ended up re-assigned to Guadalcanal in the hopes they would help break through the stalemate.¹⁶ Suffering in the oppressive humidity, with some of their equipment stuck in Australia, French’s 3rd battalion remained at Henderson Airfield while the 1st battalion of the 161st joined the initial stage of an offensive attack on the western section of Mount Austen, a Japanese stronghold. The 2nd and 3rd battalions endured repeated Japanese bombings at Henderson Airfield, and for the next month and a half, members of the 161st engaged in battles to take Guadalcanal. The last Japanese troops left the island on February 7, 1943, and the 3rd battalion received orders to conduct patrols across the island to inform the native population that the Japanese no longer held it.¹⁷

During its mission on Guadalcanal, the 3rd battalion’s patrol mission was arduous, with limited rations and an ever-present threat of malaria. Only three hundred of the five hundred men who began the island patrol made it through to the end.¹⁸ Through the spring and summer of 1943, training for the men continued. On June 30, 1943, forces under the command of General Douglas MacArthur attacked New Guinea, and forces under Admiral William F. Halsey landed on the New Georgia Islands. Allied forces gave specific attention to the island of New Georgia,

¹⁴ Undated and untitled copy of newspaper clipping, copy of newspaper clipping, Box 1, Folder 6, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Laura Briere, “A History of Washington State’s 161st Infantry Regiment, 1940-1945: The Edwin G. Park Project,” 65.

¹⁷ Briere, “A History of Washington State’s 161st Infantry Regiment, 1940-1945,” 71, 83.

¹⁸ Briere, “A History of Washington State’s 161st Infantry Regiment, 1940-1945,” 85.

the location of a key airfield the Japanese built at Munda.¹⁹ French and the 161st landed on New Georgia on July 21, 1943.

On July 23, the 161st Infantry Regiment began a four-mile march on the Liana Beach Trail to an assembly area near the command post for the 37th division, to which the 161st was now attached.²⁰ While supporting the 37th Infantry Division in their attack on Bibilo Hill, which overlooked Munda airfield, the 161st came under heavy fire from a ridgeline, later to be named Bartley's Ridge.²¹ The 3rd battalion attacked the ridgeline from the front beginning on July 25, with the 1st battalion flanking their position. The initial attack was only partially successful, and after a brief break the 161st resumed the attack on July 28, successfully clearing the ridgeline.²² It would take another month before fighting on New Georgia ended.

French received a superficial flesh wound to his right hand on July 24, but returned to duty immediately. He received another superficial shrapnel wound to his left hand on July 26 while sitting in a tank, voluntarily acting as a gunner and guide for the tank force commander.²³ French led his company in an attack against Bartley's Ridge on July 27, and as they progressed up the hill he "was hit in the chest by a Japanese bullet and died instantly."²⁴

Postwar Legacy

French was initially buried on New Georgia. Colonel James L. Dalton II wrote to Ethel French on September 20, 1943, noting that her son was a "capable officer and a fine man. He was well thought of by all of our Regiment... We will take inspiration and strength from his

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Briere, "A History of Washington State's 161st Infantry Regiment, 1940-1945," 92.

²¹ Duane Colt Denfeld, Ph.D., "161st Infantry Regiment, Washington National Guard," *historylink.org*, February 1, 2012, <https://www.historylink.org/File/10021>.

²² "161st Infantry Regiment," *25th Infantry Division Association Tropic Lightning*, <https://www.25thida.org/units/infantry/161st-infantry-regiment/> (Accessed July 8, 2019).

²³ Briere, "A History of Washington State's 161st Infantry Regiment, 1940-1945," 101.

²⁴ Letter from Colonel James L. Dalton II to Mrs. Ethel French, September 20, 1943, Box 1, Folder 6, Washington State University Libraries' Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC).

gallant sacrifice.”²⁵ Lieutenant Colonel David Buchanan of the 161st wrote to Ethel French on September 25, 1943, offering his condolences and assuring her that French’s “passing was instantaneous, unattended by suffering or anguish.”²⁶ Buchanan went on to note that French was “bravely and courageously lending his command” in a fierce engagement when he died, and he was “carried out immediately and rests peacefully in the company of his comrades in arms.”²⁷

French posthumously received the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism while serving with the 161st Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division. His citation reads, in part, as follows:

...while leading a combined tank and infantry assault on New Georgia, Solomon Islands, on July 26, 1943, and softening resistance of a Japanese-held hill for later attacks. Although he had been wounded while reconnoitering the nest of pillboxes, machine gun and rifle pits, Lieutenant French volunteered to ride in the lead tank and guide the attack. Under intense close-range fire, he repeatedly exposed himself in the open turret or dismounted to direct the tank column and infantry in assaults on centers of resistance. Once he dismounted in the midst of heavy caliber fire to learn the identity of troops he moving in the brush and, finding that they were Japanese, return to the tank’s 37-mm. gun and turned it on twenty of the enemy. When his tank was drawing heavy fire from machine guns, he dismounted again and mapped a plan of attack with a noncommissioned officer. In the five-hour battle, his calm appraisal and forceful action was responsible for eliminating thirteen automatic weapons positions and knocking two 75-mm. guns out of action. He personally accounted for the destruction of five pillboxes.”²⁸

French also received two bronze stars, among other medals, badges, and awards. In 1949, his remains were re-buried in Pullman City Cemetery. His fiancé, Ruth Kanahele, married and had seven children. She died in 2002 at the age of 76.²⁹ Erich S. Klossner, a WSC graduate in

²⁵ Letter from Colonel James L. Dalton II to Mrs. Ethel French, September 20, 1943, Box 1, Folder 6, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC).

²⁶ Letter from Lt. Col. David Buchanan to Mrs. Ethel French, September 25, 1943, Box 1, Folder 6, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC).

²⁷ Letter from Lt. Col. David Buchanan to Mrs. Ethel French, September 25, 1943, Box 1, Folder 6, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC).

²⁸ “1LT Kenneth P. French,” *militaryhallofhonor.com*, <https://militaryhallofhonor.com/honoree-record.php?id=313073> (Accessed June 9, 2020).

²⁹ “Obituaries: Ruth Luka Hopeau,” *The Honolulu Advertiser*, December 30, 2002.

Modern Languages, composed a poem honoring both French and another WSC graduate who died on New Georgia, Kenneth Christian. The poem reads, as follows:

TO THOSE YET LIVING

(In Honor of Kenneth French and Kenneth Christian)

*We could not know, we could not see
How great the sacrifice might be.*

*When we went forth two years ago...
We could not see, we could not know.*

*The chart must now unfold for all:
If freedom shall stand or free men fall,*

*So little it is each pays and gives
Who offers his gold the while he lives...*

*Only those who have gone before,
Who keep their silence for evermore.*

*Only they, of all, might say:
"All of myself, I had to pay..."*

*Lest anyone boast how much he gives,
'Tis little enough, if he yet lives!"³⁰*

³⁰ Erich S. Klossner, "TO THOSE YET LIVING," newspaper clipping, Box 1, Folder 19, Washington State University Libraries' Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.