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A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:

BRIGADIER G. V. PALMER

A concise biography of Brigadier Godfrey Vaughan PALMER, who served in the Regular Army from 1918 until 1928, after which he served with the Territorial Army. He rose to the rank of Brigadier in the Second World War, serving in France, the U.K., Sicily and Greece.
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A Concise Biography of Brigadier Godfrey Vaughan PALMER

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Brigadier Godfrey Vaughan PALMER, C.B.E., T.D.



Brigadier Godfrey Vaughan PALMER, C.B.E., T.D., was an officer in the British Army between 1918 and 1948. He held a Regular Army commission from 1918 until 1928; and then held a commission in the Territorial Army from 1928 until 1948. He rose to command a battalion in The Queen's Royal Regiment at the beginning of the war and led it in France and Belgium in 1940. He then became a sub-area commander in the United Kingdom and later in Sicily. His most remarkable feat, however, was organising the relief aid to the Greek people immediately after the conclusion of the civil war.

Godfrey Vaughan PALMER was born in Steyning, Sussex, on 21 February 1900. He was the second son of the Reverend Alfred William Washington PALMER, and his wife Alice (1860 – 1935). The couple had four sons, who were:

- Stephen Vaughan PALMER (1895 – 1945),
- Godfrey Vaughan PALMER (1900 – 1972),
- Christopher Vaughan PALMER (1901 – 1979),
- Martin Vaughan PALMER (1905 – 1995).

Godfrey was known as 'Reggie', but it is not known when he acquired this name, or how widely he was known by this name.

In 1901, the family were living at 72, Florence Road, Preston in Brighton. Godfrey's father is not shown on the 1901 Census, so it is presumed that he was working and living away. In July 1905, the family had moved to Tintern Parva in Monmouthshire, Wales. Godfrey was sent to Seafield School, which was located in Collington Lane, Bexhill in Sussex. The headmaster at the school was the renowned educator and rugby union international Grenville COGHLAN, who was the son of the founder of the school. It is likely that Godfrey learned to play rugby union while a pupil at Seafield School, which was to stand him in good stead later-on.

On completing his secondary education, PALMER entered the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, as a Gentleman Cadet. On completion of his military training, he was commissioned on 20 December 1918 in The Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment) in the rank of Second Lieutenant (service number 6924) and aged eighteen years. PALMER joined the 1st Battalion of his regiment, which was just returned from France to Aldershot. In 1920, the battalion moved to Ireland, being stationed at Kilworth, and on 20 December that year, PALMER was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant. On 1 January 1921, the regiment was retitled as The Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surrey).

Between 8 July 1922 and 1 February 1923, Lieutenant PALMER was specially employed at the Regimental Depot at Stoughton Barracks, Guildford. The year of 1923 saw the battalion leave Ireland with the ceasefire in the civil war, and it returned to Aldershot where it joined the 6th Infantry Brigade. Two years later, the battalion moved to Dover to join the 10th Infantry Brigade of the 4th Division. On 13 April 1927, the battalion left the United Kingdom and sailed to Shanghai in China, but Lieutenant PALMER did not sail with them.

The post First World War British Army was not an easy place in which a young officer could develop their career. The period was one of restrictive defence budgets, so progress up through the ranks was slow, based upon seniority and the retirement of senior officers. PALMER decided to leave the Army and take a job in the City of London. He resigned his commission on 22 December 1928 and was granted a gratuity and the rank of Lieutenant in the Reserve of Officers. The next day, he was commissioned in the Territorial Army in the rank of Lieutenant (seniority from 20 December 1920) and joined the 5th Battalion, The Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surrey). This was a Territorial Army battalion of the regiment, the headquarters of which was based at the Drill Hall, Sandford Road, Guildford. The following day, 24 December, PALMER was promoted to the rank of Captain and assumed command of 'A' Company which was based at Reigate and Dorking.

Godfrey PALMER's life settled into a period of routine, with his new job in London and his role as a Territorial Army officer. During this period, the expectation was that officers attended the weekly drill nights, and the two-week annual camp. The Territorial Army was also a social association for many people between the world wars, and most drill halls had various social events for the officers and men to attend. The 5th Battalion held a series of lectures by senior officers, which were preceded by an officer's dinner.

A steady progression continued for PALMER, with his promotion to the rank of Brevet Major on 1 January 1933, and then substantive Major on 20 February 1933. In late 1935, Major PALMER relinquished command of 'A' Company, and became the battalion's second-in-command. On 1 November 1937, PALMER reached what most officers perceived as the pinnacle of their careers when he was promoted Lieutenant Colonel and assumed command of the 5th Battalion of his regiment. This was the consequence of the retirement of Lieutenant Colonel Sturmy CAVE, D.S.O., T.D., after four years in command. The battalion was part of the all Queen's 131st Infantry Brigade in the 44th (Home Counties) Infantry Division

As the likelihood of another major conflict grew closer, the decision was taken in April 1939 to double the size of the Territorial Army. This was easier said than done, as forming new units meant that the cadre of experienced officers and non-commissioned officers were split up, plus many were required to fulfil training roles within the expanding Army. The Queen's Royal Regiment decided to split each of their three territorial battalions, and PALMER remained in command of the 1st/5th Battalion when the new 2nd/5th Battalion was formed in August 1939 during the summer camp at Falmer in Sussex.

The battalion mobilized on 28 August 1939 in the 131st Infantry Brigade, 44th (Home Counties) Infantry Division. The brigade moved to the North Dorset training area, with the battalion stationed in billets in Sherborne. It is notable that the 1st/6th and 1st/7th Battalion both received Regular Army officers in command in place of Territorial Army officers, but Lieutenant Colonel PALMER remained in command. The division was warned for deployment to Finland to help the fight against the Russians, but the move never took place.¹ During an inspection by the Director of Training, the 1st/5th Battalion was adjudged to be the best trained battalion in Home Forces, an accolade indeed.

The brigade arrived in France on 3 April 1940. The division came under command of III Corps and moved to the front line. When the Germans invaded the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and France on 9 April 1940, the division moved forward into Belgium. The 1st/5th Battalion was at this time the brigade reserve. The first main battle the brigade fought was at St. Omer and La Bassee between 20 and 29 May 1940. At dawn on the 21st, Brigadier UTTERSON-KELSO ordered Lieutenant Colonel PALMER to attack the village of Petegem (near Caestre) which was in enemy hands. The battalion infiltrated into the village to find it a shambles, full of the dead, and covered in smoke. By 14.00 hours, the battalion found itself increasingly isolated, so Lieutenant Colonel PALMER decided to thin his forces out and withdraw from the village. The pressure grew on the division and PALMER found that all his companies were cut off from his headquarters (the main form of communication being field telephone or runners).

¹ At this early stage of the war, Finland had been invaded by the Soviet Union, and the Allies sided with the Finns against the Soviets. As the war progressed, Germany became an ally of Finland, and the United Kingdom became an ally of the Soviet Union. It is probably just as well that British troops were not sent to Finland.

The brigade reformed at Heule, with the battalion missing 'C' Company, and with twenty-two officers and four-hundred and forty-seven men left out of the about eight-hundred who had started the battle. Meanwhile, the Germans had crossed the River Somme and the British Expeditionary Force was in danger of being trapped. A new line was formed from the River Escaut to La Basse. On 27 May, PALMER was absent from the battalion presiding at a court martial when the next attack fell on the battalion. By 13.00 hours, he was back in command of his battalion and mounted a small counter-attack. By 14.30 hours, it was raining heavily and around this time, PALMER was injured but remained in command. By 28 May, it was obvious that the British forces in France and Belgium were in peril, so a general withdrawal back to Dunkirk commenced. The battalion reached Dunkirk where PALMER was again injured in an air attack.

During the evening of 31 May, the battalion made its way down to the Mole, where most were evacuated at about 21.00 hours aboard H.M.S. Excellent. By 06.00 hours, they were back in Dover. Lieutenant Colonel PALMER was Mentioned in Dispatches on 20 December 1940 for his services in France and Belgium.

On their return to the U.K., the battalion and brigade had to be reconstituted, re-equipped and trained. The 131st Infantry Brigade reformed in the Oxford area, with the battalion being camped at Port Meadow on the outskirts of the city. Between 31 March and 7 April 1941, PALMER deputised as the officiating brigade commander whilst Brigadier UTTERSON-KELSO was absent. He officiated again as brigade commander when Brigadier UTTERSON-KELSO was posted away on 15 April 1941, until Brigadier I. T. P. HUGHES arrived on 5 May. Promotion for Godfrey PALMER came on 14 August 1941 at forty-one years of age when he was promoted to the rank of Acting Colonel on appointment as the Garrison Commander for Chatham in Kent. At this time, Chatham was the location of a major Royal Navy dockyard, and the home of the Royal Engineers. He remained in command at Chatham until 4 May 1943, during which he was promoted to the rank of Temporary Colonel on 14 February 1942 after six months continuous service in the rank of Acting Colonel.

A move to the Mediterranean followed, with PALMER being promoted to the rank of Acting Brigadier and to take command of the Number 6 Base Sub-Area to be established at Syracuse in Sicily. He assumed command on 5 May 1943, on arriving in North Africa. The actual invasion of Sicily began on 9 July 1943, with Syracuse being secured by 12 July. PALMER's objective was to get the port working again, whilst securing the town. He reported to Fortbase, headed by Major General Sir Brian ROBERTSON, which was responsible for the lines of communication in the Central Mediterranean Force.

On 5 November 1943, PALMER was promoted to the rank of Temporary Brigadier. His work at Syracuse was recognised by the award of the Officer of the Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) on 23 March 1944.

His citation, prepared by Major General ROBERTSON, states:

Did excellent work in organising the port of Syracuse. Due largely to his energy the tonnage handled at that port improved rapidly, an important factor in the administration situation. He also handled the local administration of his Sub-Area with commendable success, although his staff had not practical experience of this work before.

The Allies advance through Sicily was completed by 17 August, and then the battle moved onto the Italian mainland. On 11 January 1945, PALMER was also Mentioned in Dispatches for his service in Italy. In January 1945, PALMER was transferred to Greece to join the Headquarters of the Military Liaison team in Greece. This team was headed by Major General I. T. P. HUGHES, with whom he had served with in 131st Infantry Brigade. He was appointed the Brigadier (Supplies and Relief) and head of the Military Liaison Headquarters in Athens.

He was awarded the Territorial Army Efficiency Decoration (T.D.) on 25 January 1945, and on 11 April 1945 he was promoted to the rank of Colonel in the Territorial Army. He was also Mentioned in Dispatches in recognition of gallant and distinguished services in the field.

The scale of what Brigadier PALMER achieved is best summarised in his citation for the honour of Commander of the Order of the British Empire (C.B.E.) which he received on 13 December 1945. Written by Lieutenant General Ronald SCOBIE, Commander of Land Forces Greece, it stated:

Brig PALMER became Brig (Supplies and Relief) and head of Military Liaison HQ Greece in Jan 1945 and was entirely responsible for the relief in Greece from then until the work was taken over by UNRRA at the end of March 1945.

As a result of the inevitable early difficulties the relief programme did not get very far before the rebellion broke out in Dec 1944 and it was brought almost to a standstill by the rebellion. In spite of this however, it had to be completed by the end of March.

On his arrival therefore, Brig PALMER was confronted by the task of doing six months work in two months. This he succeeded in doing. There was little precedent for the problem, but by his painstaking and determined industry and by his encouraging leadership of an untried staff Brig PALMER produced an organization to deal with it. The result was that the promises made to the Greek Government regarding relief supplies were substantially fulfilled in spite of the rebellion. This was a very great service to the Greek people in that it contributed very materially to the restoration of economic stability in the country and it has done much to enhance British prestige in Greece.

It has moreover had a great military value in that it has helped to restore order in Greece which will make it possible for British Units to be withdrawn earlier for service elsewhere. I consider that Brig PALMER's service, which has produced such important results, has been very distinguished indeed and worthy of the highest praise.

I therefore recommend most strongly that he be awarded the CBE.'

He was also Mentioned in Dispatches for gallant and distinguished services in the field on 29 November 1945. Further recognition for Brigadier PALMER came on 16 January 1948 with the award of the Legion of Merit in the Degree of Officer by the United States Government; and the Silver Medal of the Greek Red Cross. Circa May 1945, PALMER transferred to Austria to become the Brigadier General Staff of the British Military Mission to Austria, and Officer Commanding British Troops in Vienna. On 12 February 1946, he was retained of the Active List but supernumerary to the Establishment. He transferred to the Territorial Army Reserve of Officers on 13 February 1951, to which he belonged to until 13 May 1954, when he reached the age limit and ceased to belong to the Reserve.

Aside from Army career, PALMER was also an international rugby player. He started playing rugby at Sandhurst, and went on to play for Harlequins, Richmond, the Army and Combined Services. He was capped three times for England on the wing. His debut came on 11 February 1928 at Lansdowne Road against Ireland. His next match was at Twickenham against France, where he scored two tries. The last cap came on 17 March, again at Twickenham against Scotland.

Godfrey PALMER married Marjorie DRYSDALE (1901 – 1994) on 21 February 1930 at St. Mary the Virgin church in Shalford, Surrey. They had two children, their first child being Alan Vaughan PALMER who was born on 4 September 1934 in Surrey. Godfrey's elder brother Stephen died on 16 October 1945 at Jhelum in India. He was a Lieutenant Colonel (service number IA/531) in the British Indian Army and had served with the 1st Punjab Regiment. He is buried in Grave 12. A. 1. of the Karachi War Cemetery, which is now in Pakistan.

After the Second World War, PALMER resumed his career in the City of London. On 26 June 1951, he arrived by air at San Francisco in the U.S.A., presumably on business. At this time, he gave his address as Ivy Cottage, Hoo, near Rochester in Kent. His son was required to undertake his National Service, and gained a place at the Royal Military Academy from where he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in The Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surrey), i.e., the same regiment that his father served with. His service number was 22733792 and the effective date of his commission 1 August 1953. He joined the 1st Battalion of his regiment and was posted to Malaya. This was the period of the Malayan Emergency, with the Communist insurgency reaching its peak. Second Lieutenant PALMER died on 12 April 1954 at Rompin, in the Province of Negri Sembilan, just a month after the battalion had arrived in Malaya. The manner or cause of his death is not known. On his Probate record, his address is given as Sharnal Street Farm, Hoo, which is presumed to be his parent's address.

Godfrey Vaughan PALMER died on 28 April 1972 in the Chatham area, aged seventy-two years.

As a Territorial Army officer, albeit one who had served in the Regular Army, Godfrey PALMER did well to reach the rank of Brigadier during the Second World War. Not all officers could have command appointments of front-line formations, and there were many more roles requiring competent officers to fill. PALMER progressed from command of a sub-area in the U.K. to a demanding role as a sub-area commander in Sicily. His transfer to the British Army Liaison Team in Greece, at the time of much upheaval in that country, is an indication of the respect in which he was held. It is likely that as he was known to Major General HUGHES, who led the Liaison Team, he was personally selected for that role. A measure of his performance is the award of the C.B.E., which was not a common honour given to soldiers of the Territorial Army.

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