

THE

# SPANISH INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

OF

# 1919

and the Coast Guard's Response in  
Unalaska and Dillingham, Alaska

BY NORA L. CHIDLOW, ARCHIVIST  
UNITED STATES COAST GUARD HISTORIAN'S OFFICE



*I would like to extend special thanks to the following people with their assistance for this article:*

*Kris Holmes, granddaughter of Nestor Brunila, UNALGA's carpenter, for going through photographs and papers for information on her grandfather's career in the Coast Guard.*

*Frank Sheppard, grandson of Frank Wilson Sheppard, for providing images and information from his grandfather's time on UNALGA.*

*Timothy Troll, Executive Director of the Bristol Bay Heritage Land Trust, Alaska, for his insights into the life and times of Dr. Linus H. French, and the Alaskan cannery industry.*

*Dr. Robin McLachlan, retired history professor, Bathurst, Australia, for providing information on Annie Bertha Parry Warden, a Red Cross nurse who served on UNALGA.*

# The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1919

## AND THE COAST GUARD'S RESPONSE IN UNALASKA AND DILLINGHAM, ALASKA

BY NORA L. CHIDLOW, ARCHIVIST, UNITED STATES COAST GUARD HISTORIAN'S OFFICE

**A**s the world returned to some normalcy following World War I, the United States Coast Guard was readjusting to its peacetime duties. The service remained under Navy control until 28 August 1919, when all Coast Guard cutters were returned to the Treasury Department. For cutters assigned to the Bering Sea Patrol in Alaska and its regions, normal duties included checking vessel cargo for illegal fur trade, counting fish cannery employees for the 1920 census, providing medical assistance to the population, including Alaskan natives, and acting as representatives of the government. The Spanish influenza pandemic that gripped the United States in 1918 was nearing an end. In just two years, it claimed the lives of 50 million people worldwide, including some 675,000 Americans. By December 1918, there were more than 1,100 deaths in Alaska. However, the Bristol Bay area, in the south-central part of mainland Alaska, population a little over a thousand, seemed untouched, but dance halls and pool rooms nevertheless were closed, and ships were unable to make port due to ice. Local boys who served in the war returned home safely, and the winter of 1918 had been a mild one – snow was only five feet deep in some areas in the village of Unalaska, population about 360<sup>1</sup>. But no one could predict what would happen in the spring of 1919 – or the role of the Coast Guard that year.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hudson, Raymond L.; *Family After All: Alaska's Jesse Lee Home, Vol. 1, Unalaska 1889-1925*. Hardscratch Press, Walnut Creek, CA, 2007.



■ UNALGA, in background, anchored at Unalaska, summer 1919 *Sheppard Family Photo*.

Alaska's population in 1919 was largely native Aleutians, with seasonal fish cannery employees. Most of the ethnic Russians were gone, but the Yup'iks and Aleutians followed the Russian orthodox faith. Coastal towns were the first to be afflicted with the first wave of influenza in 1918, when likely ships carrying infected passengers and crew arrived. and it quickly spread to the more isolated villages in southeast Alaska. Relief expeditions, through the Bureau of Education, were sent to remote areas. At that time, the Bureau of Education was a government agency that provided teachers and medical personnel in Alaska. Teachers from the Bureau of Education initially provided limited health care services, but doctors and nurses were later privately hired by fish canneries in the area. Doctors were also often recruited in Alaska as federal representatives, first as commissioners of the Bureau of Education, and later as representatives of the Public Health Service. However, while they did provide some assistance, they could not contain or curb the influenza. The reason lay in the fact that most of the remote Alaskan villages were accessible only by dog sled. For instance, people in Dillingham, Alaska did not know that World War I had ended until a little over a month after the armistice was signed, and it took the messenger twelve days by dog sled to deliver that news.<sup>2</sup>

The Alaska Packers Association was the parent organization for most of the salmon canneries throughout the state. Due to Alaska's remoteness, the Association more or less built entire infrastructures around their operations, and transported food, supplies, and personnel via their own fleet of ships.<sup>3</sup> Thus, when the influenza hit Bristol Bay, the Association was quick to respond with their own medical assistance, caring for orphan children, and burying the dead. Free healthcare to cannery employees and the Natives remained a service of the Association until 1911, when a government hospital was established.<sup>4</sup> However, healthcare was seasonal, since most cannery employees made the trek north each summer, returning home in the fall and hospitals were closed at the end of the fishing season.<sup>5</sup>

April 1919 – Easter – was a time of rebirth with warmer weather spreading throughout the re-

2 Troll, Timothy; *Bristol Bay Remembers: The Great Flu of 1919*. Bristol Bay Native Corporation and Bristol Bay Land Heritage Trust, 2019.

3 Ibid.

4 Alaska Packers Association, *Report on 1919 Influenza Epidemic; Nanek Station, Nushagak Station [and] Kvichak Station, Bristol Bay, Alaska, October 1919*, Alaska State Library

5 Troll; *ibid.*

gion. Soon the villagers of Unalaska started feeling sick on 23 May.<sup>6</sup> To that end, the Coast Guard cutters UNALGA and BEAR were called upon to help combat the pandemic that ensued. The Revenue Cutter Service, the predecessor of the Coast Guard, had long provided assistance with pandemic outbreaks since shortly after its inception in 1790, enforcing strict quarantine regulations in ports around the United States. This was nothing new for UNALGA and BEAR, but the crew's unwavering devotion to duty and the fragility of human life in the summer of 1919 made their roles unique.

On 20 April 1919, UNALGA left San Francisco for her annual Bering Sea Patrol cruise, under the command of Captain Frederick G. Dodge. At fifty-eight, Captain Dodge, a Massachusetts native, had served thirty-one years in the Coast Guard, and would put in eight more years until he retired in 1927.<sup>7</sup> Her crew was a mixture of Coast Guard and Navy men, and this would be her last cruise with such a crew until World War II.<sup>8</sup>

Fireman Frank Wilson Sheppard was among UNALGA's crew that summer, having reported on board in January 1919 straight from the Naval Training Station in San Pedro, California. The twenty-one-year-old Texan was the son of a farmer and was taking courses to become a teacher when he entered the service in August 1918. A voracious reader, he devoured every book in UNALGA's library. He did not own a camera, but acquired copies of photographs depicting the chilling scenes that UNALGA crew would encounter at Unalaska and Dillingham. Although he despised shoveling coal, Sheppard was encouraged to work his way up to be an officer. However, upon the completion of his UNALGA cruise in November 1919, he left the service, returned to his fiancée, and resumed his teaching career during a time when a four-year teaching degree was not required. He eventually became the principal of a school northwest of Fort Worth, Texas, that had only five teachers. Dust storms unfortunately exacerbated a lung condition, perhaps from coal dust, that forced his family to relocate to Kerrville, Texas some 250 miles away. At the time of his death in 1939 at the age of forty-two, Sheppard was the custodian of the Kerrville post office, where one of his duties was to shovel coal. He had come full circle because of a boilerman's certificate he had obtained while on UNALGA.<sup>9</sup>



■ Frank Wilson Sheppard  
*Sheppard Family Photo*



■ Officers of UNALGA: Standing (l-r): LTJG William B. Huebner (Navy), CAPT Eugene A. Coffin (USCG), CAPT Warner K. Thompson (USCG), CAPT Theodore G. Lewton (USCG), LT Ethan W. Scott (Navy), LTJG Frank H. Johnson (USPHS) Sitting: LT Carl E. Anderson (Navy), CAPT Frederick G. Dodge (USCG), LT Gordon W. MacLane (USCG) *Sheppard Family Photo*

6 Ibid.

7 *United States Coast Guard Register of Officers*, Coast Guard Historian's Office, Washington, D.C.

8 Cutter Files, Coast Guard Historian's Office, Washington, D.C.

9 Emails exchanged with Frank Sheppard, grandson of Frank Wilson Sheppard, June 2020.

# UNALASKA

UNALGA anchored at Akun Island, part of the Aleutian chain of islands on Alaska's southwestern tip, nearly a month later, on 26 May. Riding out a severe storm later that day, UNALGA received a message from the Navy ship SATURN, cruising off Unimak Pass, some sixty-five miles to the northeast.<sup>10</sup> It served as a formal, first notification to UNALGA of the presence of the influenza in Unalaska, and Captain Dodge responded, saying UNALGA would arrive at Unalaska at noon the next day. However, at 3:30 the next morning, UNALGA received a similar message from Dr. Linus H. French, the administrator of Kakanak Hospital in Dillingham, some four hundred sixty-five miles to the north in the Bristol Bay region:

***“Influenza epidemic raging through the whole Bristol Bay district especially Nushagak and Koggiung probably sixty or more deaths with no help available for caring for sick and burying dead. We appeal to yours ship for help. Doctor French US Bureau of Education”***<sup>11</sup>

Captain Dodge responded:

***“Epidemic at Unalaska, no medical assistance except for UNALGA. Will remain at Unalaska until further orders.”***<sup>12</sup>

Upon receipt of Dr. French's message, UNALGA got underway at 5 am, earlier than planned, and anchored just off Unalaska at 10:35 am on 28 May. What they found there was unspeakable, and Captain Dodge decided on the spot, without awaiting further orders, that UNALGA would remain at Unalaska until the village was back on its feet. He and Dr. Frank H. Johnson, UNALGA's medical officer, inspected the village the same day.

■ UNALGA crew with Native villagers. Brunila/Holmes Family Photo



10 “The Coast Guard”, *New York Times*, December 19, 1920.

11 UNALGA Logbooks, National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 26, Logs of Revenue Cutters and Coast Guard Vessels, 1819-1941.

12 Ibid.

More than eighty cases of influenza had emerged at Unalaska in the last three days, with four deaths. Two hundred cases would be reported the next day. The day after, the village ceased to function.<sup>13</sup> Dr. Johnson returned to UNALGA, and, with Captain Dodge, asked for volunteers to go into homes to build fires, deliver food, nurse the sick, and carry out and bury the dead. One hundred and twenty nine gallons of hot soup from UNALGA was delivered to the sick. Very often, crew would find bodies that had lain there for days, many with children shivering and starving in the same home.

An agent of the Alaska Commercial Company was found severely ill, and Dr. Johnson packed him in ice for two days. His home was also converted into a makeshift hospital.<sup>14</sup> The only assistance at that point came from two local hospitals and several doctors. Wearing masks for protection, Dr. Johnson and some of the crew spent the day caring for the worst cases, and UNALGA's radio operators took over the naval wireless station at nearby Dutch Harbor. Medicines and blankets were also delivered. At one point, the crew was on duty for four days straight, with no sleep.<sup>15</sup> Captain Dodge remained on UNALGA, awaiting further orders from headquarters.<sup>16</sup>

■ UNALGA crew wearing masks. *Sheppard Family Photo*



13 "Sad Mission of Unalga", *Douglas Island News*, Douglas, AK, September 5, 1919.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Bertha Parry Warden, "Fighting the Influenza in Alaska", *San Francisco Examiner*, 20 July 1919.

16 UNALGA Logbooks, *ibid.*



■ UNALGA crew with masks and coffins. Brunila is in uniformed coat behind coffin at right *Brunila/Holmes Family Photo*

Three men under the command of Navy dental surgeon Captain Ethan W. Scott went to the village of Dutch Harbor; and three men under the command of Lieutenant Carl E. Anderson, United States Navy, went to the village of Unalaska. A commissary officer was responsible for issuing and cooking food for the victims, and the executive officer oversaw the distribution of food and the construction of a temporary shore hospital, which began on 29 May. Boatswain Sigval Johnson and ten other men were ordered to grave duty – making coffins, digging graves, and burying the dead. Digging graves was no easy feat, considering that the ground was still half frozen and the cemetery was on a rocky hillside. Simple graveside services were conducted by an officer from UNALGA. This was done under the direction of the cutter’s carpenter, Nestor Brunila, nicknamed “Chips” – a common nickname for ship carpenters by his fellow sailors. He was a Finnish immigrant who was, at thirty-four, in all likelihood, UNALGA’s official photographer.<sup>17</sup> Brunila, the son of a boat pilot, had intended to attend a navigation school in Finland, following a required three years of “deep sea sailing” across the globe. He was at sea beginning in 1905, when he left Finland, and drifted into San Francisco, California under no power in January 1908. He enlisted in the Revenue Cutter Service in December 1908, likely as a cabin boy, and worked his way up to carpenter. Brunila joined UNALGA in 1915 and stayed in the Coast Guard until his retirement in 1946.<sup>18</sup> He died a year later in California.<sup>19</sup>

■ Nestor Brunila on UNALGA  
*Brunila/Holmes Family Photo*



17 Emails exchanged with Kris Brown Holmes, granddaughter of Nestor Brunila, May 2020.

18 Ibid.

19 Warden, *ibid.*



As villagers were decimated by the disease, the Jesse Lee Home quickly became overcrowded with orphaned children seemingly untouched by the influenza. Seven men - Ordinary Seaman L. Straley, Ordinary Seaman F. E. Honeywell, Seaman 2nd class Floyd Briggs, Seaman 2nd class Matthew Wilson, Fireman 3rd class Sammie Johnson, and Fireman 3rd class James Sowell - under the command of Captain Lewton, took charge of the Home, going as far as to temporarily rename it the USS UNALGA Home. Other men were added at the Home over the next few weeks as the epidemic progressed, most notably UNALGA's master-at-arms, Peter Bugaras. Born in Turkey, he became an American citizen in 1911. The forty-year-old tended to UNALGA's mascot, a dog, and was one of several men from the cutter who cared ashore for children at the Home whose parents were dead or dying. Bugaras sewed rudimentary clothing for the children and "decided that the art of bathing dogs and children must be much the same."<sup>20</sup> However, Native mothers, upon recovering from the influenza and learning about these bathing methods, feared their children would die from drowning. By 12 June, some of the smaller children in Bugaras's care were allowed to go home, as their parents had fully recovered from the influenza. Children whose parents had died were taken in by other families in the region.<sup>21</sup>

*By 12 June, some of the smaller children in Bugaras's care were allowed to go home, as their parents had fully recovered from the influenza. Children whose parents had died were taken in by other families in the region.*

<sup>20</sup> Warden, *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



■ Graves being dug in rocky, half-frozen hillside at Unalaska.  
*Brunila/Holmes Family Photo*



■ Peter Bugaras of UNALGA with children at the Jesse Lee Home. *Brunila/Holmes Family Photo*



■ Bugaras in center with moustache. Note the sign, "USS UNALGA Orphan Home." *Brunila/Holmes Family Photo.*

Captain Eugene Auguste Coffin was on board UNALGA as a commissary and watch officer. Born in China to a tea merchant and a missionary doctor, he graduated from the Revenue Cutter Service's School of Instruction in 1909 and retired a Rear Admiral in 1950.<sup>22</sup> He became a Coast Guard aviator in 1916, and served at the Rockaway Naval Air Station in Queens, New York during World War I. Regrettably, a 1917 plane crash that broke his nose and later requiring multiple surgeries ended his aviation career. Captain Coffin knew firsthand the dangers and impact of the influenza, as his first wife, Nancy Jamison Coffin, succumbed to it in October 1918, leaving two young boys. At thirty-one, this was his first trip in Alaskan waters, and Captain Coffin kept a diary of his UNALGA cruise that summer.

On 29 May, there were sixty cases of influenza at the Jesse Lee Home. It was also Captain Coffin's first day on duty there. His primary duty was caring for Mrs. Margaret Lewis, the twenty five-year-old wife of Earl Lewis, one of the teachers at the school, and eighteen other patients. The Lewises were missionaries who arrived in Alaska earlier that year, and had already lost an infant son, five days after his birth in 1918. Captain Coffin took the day shift until 9 pm, when Captain Lewton relieved him. Mrs. Lewis did not have the influenza, but instead had given birth on 23 May to her second son Robert, who survived to adulthood. A week later, Mrs. Lewis developed complications from the birth, and, on 30 May, Captain Coffin assisted Dr. Johnson with a dilation and curettage (D &C) on Mrs. Lewis without anes-



■ Eugene Coffin in 1917  
Coast Guard Historian's Office.

22 Personnel Files, Coast Guard Historian's Office, Washington, D.C.



■ Funeral of Mrs. Margaret Lewis, 1 June 1919. CAPT Coffin is in the background looking to his left, and Brunila is at far right.  
Brunila/Holmes Family Photo

thesia; his job was to hold her down. Sadly, Mrs. Lewis passed away the next evening. Minutes before she passed, Captain Coffin received news from home that his second wife, Peggy, was expecting a baby. Captain Coffin helped dress Mrs. Lewis and attended her burial on the afternoon of 1 June.<sup>23</sup>

In the meantime, the number of cases and deaths rose steadily over the next few days. On 30 May, Captain Dodge finally got a response from Coast Guard Headquarters and was directed to use his own discretion as far as UNAGLA's movements and role in battling the influenza pandemic in Alaska. By that evening, there were three hundred and fifty cases of influenza and twelve deaths at Unalaska. He was also given permission to request assistance from another Coast Guard cutter, BEAR, sailing nearby.<sup>24</sup>

Built in 1874 in Scotland, BEAR was purchased by the government in 1884. She was on Bering Sea Patrol duty in Alaskan waters from 1885 until 1926, sailing for five months at a time. Her normal duties were looking for fur seal poachers, shipwrecked whalers, and illicit trade with Alaskan Natives. She also transported reindeer from Siberia; escorted whaling vessels; served as a floating courthouse; took census data; and recorded geological, astronomical, and tidal information.<sup>25</sup> Given the fact she just happened to be sailing nearby when Captain Dodge made the decision to request her assistance, BEAR may not have been prepared to go into such a pandemic, especially when most local ports were

23 Eugene A. Coffin Diary, Alaska State Library.

24 UNALGA Logbooks, National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 26, Logs of Revenue Cutters and Coast Guard Vessels, 1819-1941.

25 Cutter Files, Coast Guard Historian's Office, Washington, D.C.

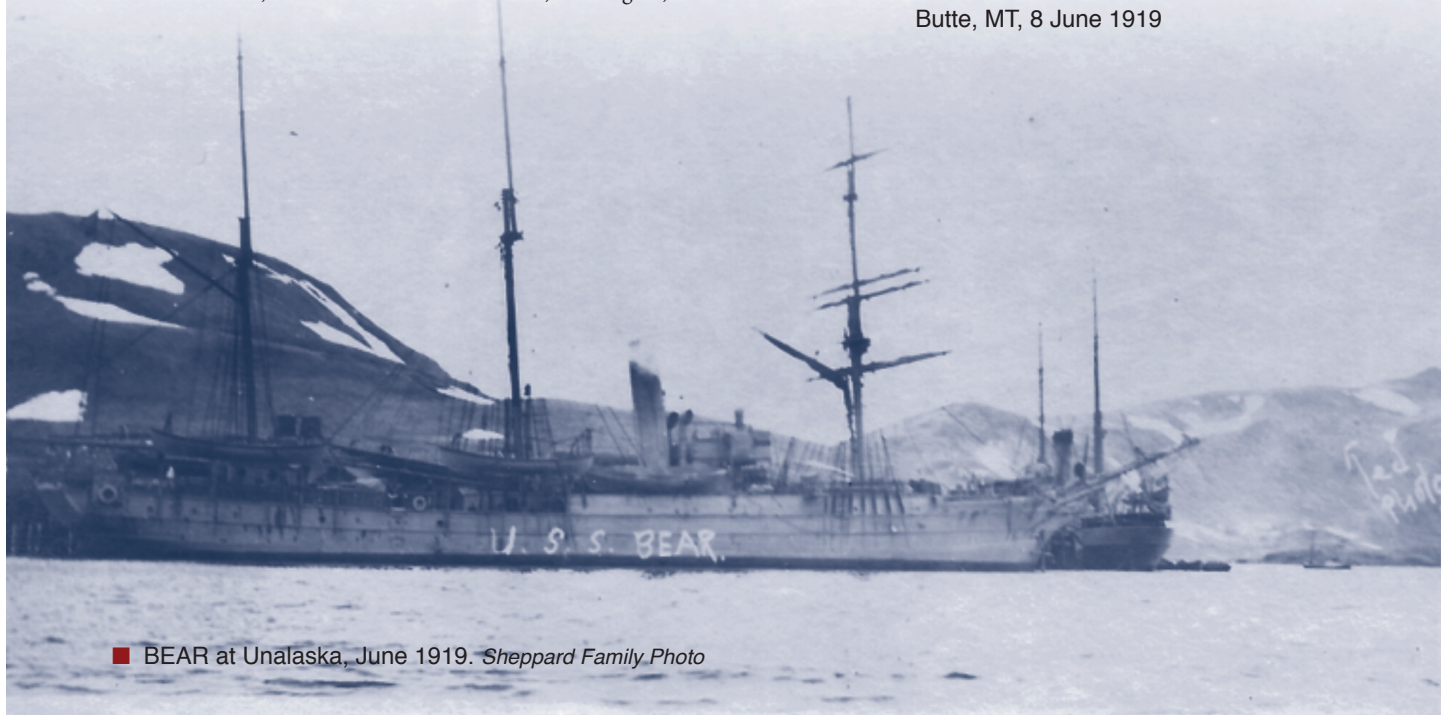
### **SURGEONS AND SUPPLIES RUSHED TO THE RESCUE OF STRICKEN ALASKANS**

Washington, June 7.—Naval ships carrying surgeons and large quantities of medical supplies have been dispatched to Bristol bay, in Alaska, to combat an epidemic of influenza which threatens about 5,000 persons, most of them employed in salmon canning industry.

The gunboat Vicksburg and the coast guard cutters Bear and Unalga, with nearly all of the naval medical men available on the northern Pacific coast, are on the scene and the Marblehead is taking medical supplies and additional doctors at Puget sound. Hospital ship Comfort will leave Charleston Monday for San Francisco and if the epidemic is not under control when she reaches the west coast the vessel will be ordered to Alaska.

The southeastern portion of Alaska has not been seriously affected by the epidemic. Deaths in the Bristol bay section, however, have been increasing at an alarming rate. Sixty persons died in one small community in one day this week.

■ News article, *Butte Miner*, Butte, MT, 8 June 1919



■ BEAR at Unalaska, June 1919. Sheppard Family Photo

under quarantine. Yet, her crew provided vaccines, disinfectant, and clean up assistance in an October 1916 dysentery outbreak at the Jesse Lee Home in Unalaska, and everyone made a full recovery within 10 days. And BEAR's crew was inoculated in November 1918 with a prophylactic vaccine, one of the earliest influenza vaccines developed.<sup>26</sup> Following this, UNALGA stocked up on medical supplies on board for any future emergencies.<sup>27</sup>

BEAR arrived at Unalaska on 3 June, the same day the service hospital ashore was completed, using a system of electric lights supplied by UNALGA. Wiring extensions were run five-hundred yards from the cutter to the hospital. By then, Chief Lewton was ill with the influenza. Captain Dodge had been hit with the influenza on 29 May, but did not think it was severe enough to be reported to Headquarters. He continued to keep a close eye on the situation, keeping in constant contact with people, receiving and sending daily reports, and being briefed by the executive officer and medical officers. Captain Dodge's illness prevented him from conferring in person with BEAR's commanding officer, Captain Preston H. Uberroth, when she arrived in port. Captain Uberroth, at fifty-seven, was a veteran of Alaskan waters, having sailed in the area for several years. He, for everyone's safety, immediately enforced a policy of social distancing, and initially declined to meet in person with Captain Dodge:



■ CAPT Preston H. Uberroth,  
Coast Guard Historian's Office

*“... would suggest that all calling be suspended for the present until surgeon of BEAR submits a report to me; you could confer with me from boat alongside or by wireless in urgent cases.”*

<sup>26</sup> BEAR Logbooks, National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 26, Logs of Revenue Cutters and Coast Guard Vessels, 1819-1941.

<sup>27</sup> *Annual Report of the Coast Guard*, 1917.



■ Boat race between UNALGA and BEAR crew. *Brunila/Holmes Family Photo*

However, Captain Uberroth sent BEAR's medical officer and twelve of her crew to join UNALGA's crew ashore in relief work. They took their seabags and made a Coast Guard warehouse in the village their headquarters. Captain Dodge recovered significantly and was able to finally meet Captain Uberroth on 5 June. He also sent a message to Coast Guard Headquarters that the situation was significantly improved with no deaths in Unalaska or Dutch Harbor.<sup>28</sup>

In the midst of such a grim task, crew managed to find some leisure time ashore, participating in boat races and tug-of-war. Captain Dodge returned to UNALGA with silver, brass, and copper objects taken from the Natives. They were afraid of him and let him take what he wanted.<sup>29</sup> To other government employees assisting with the pandemic, this may have looked like the Coast Guard was spending more time sightseeing and picking up souvenirs than tackling the task of eradicating the influenza.<sup>30</sup> It was common practice, though probably not encouraged, for Coast Guard officers and sailors stationed in Alaska to pilfer Native artifacts and take photographs of the Natives.<sup>31</sup> Fueled by stories of the gold rush there in the late 1890s, Alaska in 1919 was considered an "exotic" land for white Americans who traveled there.

The next day, 6 June, Captain Dodge personally visited the Jesse Lee Home, the U. S. Deputy Marshal at the jail, the field hospital, the Alaska Commercial Company's offices and other buildings in Unalaska that housed influenza patients. Seeing that most everyone had made a full recovery, he ordered UNALGA's crew on relief duty back to the cutter. Crew who were assigned the naval wireless station at Dutch Harbor returned to the ship on 7 June. BEAR's crew returned to the cutter on 14 June and sailed out later the same day; UNALGA sailed the next day, 15 June.<sup>32</sup> However, the influenza pandemic in Alaska was far from over. Captain Dodge had not forgotten Dr. French's plea for help.



■ Tug of war for UNALGA crew. *Brunila/Holmes Family Photo*

28 BEAR Logbooks, *ibid.*

29 Coffin Diary, *ibid.*

30 Baker, Shirley. *Report of the Bureau of Fisheries*, 26 November 1919. Baker was the warden assigned to the Bristol Bay region. In Troll, Timothy, *ibid.*

31 Subject Files, Coast Guard Historian's Office.

32 UNALGA Logbooks, *ibid.*

# DILLINGHAM

Six known villages in the Nushagak River District, in Bristol Bay, had influenza outbreaks. In the village of Dillingham, where Dr. French served, some four hundred and seventy miles north from Unalaska, some thirty people were in the hospital with influenza, many homes were infected, and there were about a hundred orphans present. Arrangements were made to send one hospital unit with one doctor, two trained nurses, and a hospital corpsman. But it wasn't enough.

A native of Ohio, Dr. Linus Hiram French arrived in Alaska in 1908 as a seasonal cannery doctor for the Alaska Packers Association. Starting in 1911, when he was hired as a government doctor, he also served as the superintendent of schools on the Nushagak River, supervised reindeer herds, and was the chief legal representative.<sup>33</sup> By the winter of 1918, Dr. French, at forty-three, was the director of Kakanak Hospital in Dillingham, population just thirty-six. In near isolation from the rest of the world, Dillingham did not learn of the arrival of the influenza in Alaska until just before Christmas 1918, despite being a coastal town on the mainland.<sup>34</sup> Dr. French wrote to his father in January 1919 that:

***“This is altogether too isolated a place at a time like this where there is so much of interest happening in the world. We are fortunate about the influenza – it hasn't struck us yet and there is not much chance for it to get in as all the approaches to Bristol Bay are guarded and travel from village to village is only allowed on permits issued by health officers.”***<sup>35</sup>

Over the next few months, being the only doctor in Dillingham, Dr. French tried diligently to protect the village by urging residents to limit travel and interaction with outsiders. Schools and other public places were closed, and anyone who came near an infected person had to don personal protective equipment – a mask, gown, and rubber gloves.<sup>36</sup> A letter dated 25 May from a Seattle food distributor who operated a cannery in the area alerted Dr. French to the presence of UNALGA.<sup>37</sup> By then, all of Dillingham, including himself, was sick with the influenza. On 26 May, Dr. French responded to a message sent by J. C. Bell, the superintendent of an Alaska Packers Association cannery at Koggiung, who had asked for medical assistance:

***“Have no help here available to send to your village. We have the same condition at Nushagak with probably fifty deaths. I will wire immediately for assistance from outside. Dr. French”***<sup>38</sup>

Dr. French sent his dire message to UNALGA in the early morning hours of 27 May. But Captain Dodge had to tend to Unalaska's residents first. En route to Dillingham, Captain Dodge wired Washington for additional assistance. A Navy cruiser, MARBLEHEAD, arrived on 17 June, and a medical unit transferred from MARBLEHEAD to UNALGA.<sup>39</sup>

33 Troll, Timothy; *Bristol Bay Remembers: The Great Flu of 1919*. Bristol Bay Native Corporation and Bristol Bay Land Heritage Trust, 2019.

34 Ibid.

35 Letter written by Dr. Linus H. French to his father, 17 January 1919. In Troll, *ibid.*

36 Instructions prepared by Dr. Frank W. Lamb, Assistant Surgeon, Public Health Service. In Troll, *ibid.*

37 Letter from H. F. Swift, Supt., Libby, McNeil & Libby Food Products, Seattle, WA to Dr. Linus H. French, Dillingham, AK, 25 May 1919. In Troll, Timothy, *ibid.*

38 UNALGA Logbooks, *ibid.*

39 “Sad Mission of Unalga”, *ibid.*



■ UNALGA crew with bodies of natives. Dr. Linus H. French is at far left. *Brunila/Holmes Family Photo*

On 19 June, UNALGA anchored off Dillingham, and, the next day, in an Alaskan Packers Association boat, Dr. Johnson went ashore to meet with Dr. French. What Dr. Johnson found was far more dire – some three hundred people were sick in Dillingham and the surrounding area, and there were over one hundred orphaned children present. Corpses – literally skulls, bones, and pieces of flesh – were discovered throughout the village.<sup>40</sup> A Public Health Service unit on board UNALGA comprising of three doctors, four nurses, and five hospital corpsmen<sup>41</sup> went ashore to care for the sick, gather orphaned children for placement, and took a trip of twenty-five miles to nearby affected villages with food and medicine.<sup>42</sup> On the afternoon of 21 June, CAPT Dodge sent a message to a Navy ship nearby:

***“Will probably require from seven to ten days to clear up situation here five outlying villages where there is sickness and unburied dead to be visited yet. Can only be visited by boat at high tide in the river. Medical unit required in Dillingham until these outlying villages are visited.”***

UNALGA’s medical unit returned to the cutter on the evening of 23 June, after thirty-seven straight hours of administering medical relief and distributing food and other provisions in Bristol Bay. Just one case of influenza was discovered on board, but was recovering well. The next day, UNALGA transported orphan children from nearby Nushagak, just six miles away, to be placed in Dr. French’s care. However, the number of orphans in his care doubled and tripled over the next two days, and by 26 June, there were seventy three orphans and a shortage of blankets and food. To that end, Captain Dodge directed that the remainder of UNALGA’s food supply be turned over to Dr. French in order to feed the children.<sup>43</sup> Congress had allocated \$100,000 for feeding, supplying, and caring for Native Alaskan residents of Alaskan coastal communities during the pandemic, but for reasons that are still unclear, was never spent.<sup>44</sup> Thus, UNALGA had to feed the village of Unalaska, plus her own crew. Ultimately, the Bureau of Education was billed \$4,175 for 3,120 rations of food and miscellaneous expenditures from UNALGA given to influenza victims.<sup>45</sup>

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Coffin diary, *ibid.*, and *Annual Report of the United States Coast Guard, 1920*

43 UNALGA Logbooks, *ibid*

44 *Fortifications Bill, 1920; Hearings before Subcommittee of House Committee on Appropriations*, Government Printing Office, Washington, 1919.

45 Hudson, *ibid.*



UNALGA's crew went ashore to inspect homes and other dwellings. They discovered bodies in a severe state of decomposition, many of which had been eaten by dogs. In fact, it was necessary to send shooting parties ashore to fend off these dogs before proper burials could be carried out. In one dug-out house, termed in Native Alaskan culture as a barabara, crew members discovered a makeshift coffin nailed to the wall, like a bunk bed, with a decaying corpse untouched by the dogs.<sup>46</sup> On the afternoon of 25 June, borrowing Dr. French's boat, Captain Coffin and UNALGA's doctors traveled to the Wood River Cannery to scope out a report of influenza in the area. Returning to UNALGA, they stocked up on supplies, gathered more people, and left at seven that evening for the journey further up the Wood River. Arriving at their destination at 1:30 in the morning, they only were able to sleep for half an hour due to mosquitos. Up at six the next morning, they rowed a skiff to a remote Native village stricken with the influenza. Captain Coffin went ashore with some other men and discovered a barabara in the village with a very offensive odor permeating the air outside. When they investigated inside, they were unexpectedly confronted by three very large malamutes. They were so surprised that Captain Coffin ran in one direction and the dogs in the other. Captain Coffin and his men shut the door, went up to the roof, broke the windows, and shot the dogs dead. They soon discovered two skulls and a pile of bones picked clean scattered all over the floor of the barabara. Upon completion of this ghastly task, the group returned to Dr. French's boat and had a hearty breakfast of fried salmon steaks. After their meal, Captain Coffin and his men returned to the village to set fire to the building as part of the cleanup effort.<sup>47</sup>

UNALGA also served as a quarantine area for healthy officers and their guests. She was also a place for entertainment during a very bleak time. Captain Coffin records in his diary on 19 June that UNALGA hosted a "big party in the wardroom", where officers dressed as girls and the women, probably nurses, dressed as officers – all except Captain Dodge and Captain Coffin.<sup>48</sup> Five days later, on 24 June, more women guests were on board – the "ship was a madhouse from having women on board all the time and no one was allowed to go ashore."<sup>49</sup>

Nurses and doctors were the backbone of the medical corps that journeyed throughout Alaska during the influenza pandemic. Many were Red Cross or Bureau of Education medical personnel. They put their lives at risk each day, coming into close proximity with the disease. On 22 June, when UNALGA first arrived at Dillingham, her nurses – Annie Bertha Parry Warden, Ethel McKinnon, Lorraine Wilbur, and Miss J. Locker – reported for duty at Kakanak Hospital.

Annie Bertha Parry Warden was an Australian nurse who served the Australian Imperial Force in Egypt and on hospital ships beginning in 1911. She later served with the Australian Army Nursing Service during World War I, and met her husband, Aubrey Warden, when he was recuperating from battle wounds.<sup>50</sup> They married in 1915, but the marriage quickly soured. Bertha, as she was known, arrived alone in San Francisco, California in the fall of 1918, likely for further medical training. Her husband promised to take the next steamer to join her, but never did, and she stayed in the United States for fifteen months. In each letter Aubrey wrote, he said he was about to leave Sydney for San Francisco.<sup>51</sup> Working

46 "Sad Mission of Unalga", *ibid.*

47 Coffin Diary, *ibid.*

48 *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Robertson Mail*, New South Wales, Australia, 19 May 1925.

51 *Evening News*, Sydney, Australia, 20 August 1920.



■ Annie Bertha Parry Warden, at left, with an unidentified Red Cross nurse, Alaska, 1919. *Brunila/Holmes Family Photo*

as a nurse at the Arequipa Sanitorium, a lung facility for women in San Francisco, at thirty-two, Bertha answered a call for nurses to help with the influenza epidemic in Alaska. On 17 June 1919, she was part of two Public Health Service medical units that transferred to UNALGA from MARBLEHEAD. Five days later, on 22 June, Bertha set foot ashore in Unalaska and journeyed throughout the area, administering aid to the sick. She returned to MARBLEHEAD on 1 July.<sup>52</sup> Not long after, she chronicled her Alaskan journey for the *San Francisco Examiner*. During her time in Alaska, Bertha lost her father, a doctor, who, ironically, passed away the same day UNALGA received that very first message about the presence of influenza in Unalaska – 26 May 1919. Upon her return to Australia in 1920, Bertha filed for divorce, which was granted in 1922, and remained devoted to nursing until her death in 1959. She never remarried.<sup>53</sup>

They discovered that the hospital's two nurses, Mamie Conley and Rhoda Ray, graduates of the Providence School of Nursing in Seattle, had been working every single day from 6 am to 11 pm for the past two years under Dr. French, doing everything that was needed to efficiently run a hospital.<sup>54</sup> Within an hour of their arrival, the UNALGA nurses invited the hospital nurses to a dance on board UNALGA. Nurses Conley and Ray declined on account of the monstrous duty to their patients – they simply could not afford to take a much needed break until the influenza was fully eradicated or even leave Dr. French alone. UNALGA's nurses stayed on the cutter for the dance and reported to the hospital ashore at noon

52 UNALGA Logbooks, *ibid*.

53 Ancestry messages exchanged with Dr. Robin McLachlan, retired history professor.

54 Troll, Timothy; *Bristol Bay Remembers: The Great Flu of 1919*. Bristol Bay Native Corporation and Bristol Bay Heritage Land Trust, 2019. In "Account of Catherine Miller, R.N.", p. 74.

the next day, but they were turned away. In contrast, one of UNALGA's doctors so impressed Dr. French with his unwavering attention to his duty and high sense of obligation that Dr. French turned over management of the hospital to him for several days.<sup>55</sup>

UNALGA resumed its normal Bering Sea Patrol duties on 28 June, when the cutter left Nushagak Bay to return to Unalaska. UNALGA received a special commendation from Secretary of Treasury Carter Glass on 17 November 1919:

***“...standing out preeminently is the valiant service you and your command rendered to the natives and others who were stricken down during the terrible scourge of influenza which swept the northern country. The measures taken to alleviate the suffering of the living and to provide food and shelter for them, and to care for the dead, are conspicuous examples of fortitude, self-abnegation, and devotion to duty and service which command the highest commendation. It is just such accomplishments as these for the cause of humanity that have given the Coast Guard its high place among our Federal Institutions, and the record of the Unalga on this occasion adds another brilliant chapter of endeavor to the annals of the service...”***<sup>56</sup>

UNALGA continued its Bering Sea patrols until 1931, when it was reassigned to Florida and the Caribbean. Sold in 1946, it was used to move Jewish refugees from Europe to Palestine, and, in February 1947, was forced aground by British navy ships near Haifa, Israel. BEAR remained in Coast Guard service until 1926 and became a museum ship in Oakland, California in 1928. BEAR was purchased by Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd in 1932. He used the cutter on his second expedition to Antarctica two years later. During World War II, BEAR was active on the Greenland Patrol, helping to protect the region from German incursions. The cutter was decommissioned in May 1944 and laid up in Boston, Massachusetts until the end of the war. In 1962, BEAR was purchased by private investors for intended use as a floating seafood restaurant and underwent extensive repairs. Following these repairs, while being towed to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a gale struck and severed its tow line. BEAR sank on 19 March 1963.<sup>57</sup>

UNALGA and BEAR played a crucial role in curbing the influenza epidemic in Alaska, paving the way for the Coast Guard's involvement in future pandemic operations. The influenza was the deadliest pandemic to hit the United States, and more percentages of population died in Alaska than any other peoples in the Americas. About forty percent of Bristol Bay's residents did not survive, but some two hundred and fifty children – cared for by crew from UNALGA and BEAR at their own risks – gave rise to Bristol Bay's next generation. As Parry Warden mentions in her 1920 article for the *San Francisco Examiner*, Coast Guard crew were:

***“...as sailors, they are heroic, but as “flu”-fighters they were Christ-like, for they were fighting a grim foe, for which 99 per cent of them are not equipped with the necessary knowledge of even self-protection.”***<sup>58</sup>

55 Baker, Shirley, *ibid.* In Troll, Timothy, *ibid.*

56 *Annual Report of the United States Coast Guard, 1920*

57 Cutter Files, Coast Guard Historian's Office

58 Warden, *ibid.*



Published by the Coast Guard Historian's Office, CG-09231

AUGUST 2020