CPT Oscar J. H. Thomas

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The following writing is from an autobiography by Oscar Thomas; excerpts were taken from recordings and background materials edited by his daughter, Janice Thomas Cramer.

ADVENTURES OF A THUNDERBIRD

45TH INFANTRY DIVISION 1939 – 1945

by OSCAR J. H. THOMAS

ACKNLOWLEDGEMENTS:

> *'I did not try to present a picture of the war itself, but a description of the events that happened to me and those men I was closely associated with, as we did our part for the glory of our 180th Infantry Regiment and especially for our division and for our* country.*'*

EARLY YEARS AND ACTIVE SERVICE

Married and working at Oklahoma Rig and Supply Company in Muskogee, Oklahoma, Oscar joined the Oklahoma National Guard, known as the Thunderbirds, just before his 24th birthday. The extra $12 per drill and $15 for summer camp would help to pay family expenses—joining the ranks of many other young men. His two brothers, Potts and Albert and three brothers-in law also served in WWII. In 1940 as war in Europe was expanding, their summer camp in San Antonio was extended, and in July, their 45th National Guard Division was inducted into federal service. Moving with his family to Ft. Sill with brothers and other relatives, an apartment was found for the Thomas family.

Oscar, now a tech sergeant, helped to establish a fully-functioning unit. Recognizing Thomas' leadership talents, the company commander approached him with these words, "*Sergeant, we have need for officers in our regiment." (Thomas, p. 10*) [His official commission ceremony occurred on 3 February 1941 when he received a direct commission]. With these encouraging remarks, Thomas accepted. Further tests of his abilities taught

him the value of becoming a knowledgeable platoon leader and the importance of communications.

> *'The next thing I knew, I had a whole series of men assigned to my company who could read and write, all of them absolutely thrilled to be assigned to communication. At the same time, I picked up five or six men with Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon (I and R) training. Every one of them was thrilled to be returned to a company in which they had been trained to work. Of course, that thrilled me, too.'* (Thomas, pp. 13, 14)

FORT BENNING

> *'I had a rough schedule in a way, but it was not anything unfamiliar. This four-months' course really qualified me for the duties expected of me because I spent four months there with about sixty second lieutenants and first lieutenants also taking the communications course. During that period of time, I learned to be an officer. I still have fond remembrances of Fort Benning.'* (Thomas, p. 22)

Eventually, 2nd Lt. Thomas became the Company Commander of Headquarters. Duties included reports, administrative work, motor officer, and mess hall responsibilities. *'I had a full house and accepted the challenge and worked at it as best I could.'* (Thomas, pp. 24, 25)

NEXT STOP: CAMP BARKLEY

Located at Abilene, Texas, and surrounding countryside, Camp Barkley became a major training area for the regiment. Thomas' descriptions related efforts to create a camp atmosphere with prefabricated tent frames and improved road conditions on the level plains. During March and April of 1941, several alerts were sounded.

> '*Our regiment would have to secure its field gear and other equipment, and just on short notice move out to the plateau. There we would participate in exercises with the division, whatever the division training schedule told us to do.'* (Thomas, p. 27)

> '*It would not be doing justice to the unit I was in if I did not mention the rain because everywhere the division of the Indians, the Thunderbirds went, it rained.'* (Thomas, p. 30)

'In July, the whole 45th Division was assembled. We were all ordered to fallout to form the division and put in battalions and companies on the parade ground in Barkley to take the division's picture. The photographer had built a great big, high frame out in front of us, a derrick that must have been ninety-feet high. He put a camera on it to take a picture. There was not a cloud in the sky—a perfect blue Texas morning. Rain clouds assembled around 2:30 while the photographer was still adjusting his equipment.'

'Sometime around three o'clock, just as the photographer was ready to snap the first picture, the skies of Texas just opened, flooding the entire area. It was a first-class cloud burst with all the trimmings. Of course, the troops started marching away with some semblance of order, but the rain came down so fast that one could hardly see the man in front of him. The expensive camera fell from the derrick and was smashed in the mud. At that moment, it became a proposition of every man for himself. Everyone headed for shelter. That was the last attempt ever to make a mass picture of the division.' (Thomas, pp. 31, 32)

NEW ORDERS, NEW ROADS

In August of 1941 the whole division moved to Louisiana for 3rd Army maneuvers; troop transportation alternated between vehicles and foot marches. Arriving in Mansfield, the men were bivouacked in pine woods areas. Thomas' descriptions of the diverse military issues to overcome were compounded by the dust, massive invasion of mosquitos and the rains. Vehicles stuck in clay-like mud took hours to retrieve and temperatures of 107 plagued them night and day.

Fine tuning this division paid off as it demonstrated '*the power and drive that we as citizen soldiers had made in less than a year of training after being civilians from different pursuits. The 180th Infantry knew our outfit was a component of an organization that would eventually be considered one of the outstanding divisions of the United States Army.'* (Thomas, p. 38)

Returning to Abilene, training continued. During the Spring, rumors circulated that the 45th would be transferred to Fort Devens, Massachusetts. A well-planned parade was executed through the town as a '*goodbye to the Great Southwest.'* (Thomas, p. 41)

[A special tribute was also paid that day to the young man, David Bennes Barkley, for whom Fort Barkley was named. A young Texas soldier of Mexican-American decent, he volunteered for and lost his life during a World

War I reconnaissance mission. Commended by General John Pershing, the Medal of Honor was posthumously awarded to his mother at her home in San Antonio in 1919. His body lay in state at the Alamo and he is buried in the Texas State Cemetery.]

Old Camp Smokey Okie (the nickname for Camp Barkley) disappeared behind the division as the long train headed northeast toward Fort Devens. During this five-day trip, Thomas became procurement officer, responsive for feeding the 1000 soldiers on board, which he accomplished by calling ahead for supplies. At a short stop in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, he remembered stationing guards to keep GIs on board.

Arriving at a well-prepared camp with barracks instead of tents, all felt their stay would be a short one until they were shipped out. The Army had other ideas, however, as they became part of V Army Corps. As more inductees arrived, bringing the regiment total to 3,500 men, scheduled endurance and fitness training were the readiness orders of the days—and the nights. Lt. Thomas continued his position as the communications officer.

He and his talented unit demonstrated *'every means of communications we had from smoke signals, to semaphore signals, to airplane panel readings, to radio, to wire, even to airplane pickup. We stuck poles with a wire with a message on it. The planes would fly down and pick up the messages we had tied on a rope. I was proud of the way our people performed and received a letter of commendation from Lt. Col. Delaney, addressed to our regiment commander for the good job our platoon had done.'* (Thomas, p. 45)

Ironically, Thomas had been approached about becoming a member of the Signal Corps, but because of the "well done" letter, this request was denied.

In July they were moved to Cape Cod, east of Buzzard Bay and close to Camp Edwards, Massachusetts.

> *'That is where we started participating in the shore-to-shore phase of amphibious landing. We were picked up on shore and moved in landing boats over to another shore. That was where we learned about LST's (landing ship tanks) and LSP's (landing ship personnel). We bivouacked one time in Martha's Vineyard on Nantucket Sound.'*
>
> *'Troop ships with landing nets were brought in so we could learn to climb down into LST's. We would rendezvous in sea and then charge the shore, land, and assault the beach. A lot of English officers, experts in amphibious operations, were attached to our*

RCT to observe and instruct. They were genial fellows. I enjoyed visiting with them.' (Thomas, pp. 50, 51)

In September 1942, General George S. Patton spoke to the officers of their division concerning the inclusion of the 45th Infantry in North Africa landing, but this did not occur, so the regiment was moved to Camp Pine, New York. Located near the Catskill Mountains, Thomas was the communications officer and set up a secret radio for messages from Corps to the division. One secret message contained the order to stop maneuvers and return to camp—very cold weather was closing in and Thomas's unit lacked winter equipment.

In December 1942, furloughs were offered which enabled the Thomas families to spend their holidays in Oklahoma. Alerted that the 45th was being reassigned, they later learned that the orders had once again been rescinded. Disappointment was replaced with the issuing of heavy winter gear, enabling the men to continue their all-weather training—lessons learned for what lay ahead.

'*From September 1940 until January, 1943, we had been training, training, training and still had not been sent into combat. In the latter part of January, the division was moved to a new station at Camp Pickett, situated near the little city of Blackstone in southern Virginia. As the time was finally nearing for us to be shipped out, it became necessary for a lot of our families to go back home.*' (Thomas, p. 56)

Fortunately, the three women family members drove an able Chevy through the snowy weather across parts of the U.S. and arrived safely in Oklahoma.

'We had had amphibious training in Fort Devens. In fact, while we were there, we had shore-to-shore landings, but we also practiced loading onto ships and climbing down nets, getting on boats, and landing on shore. We practiced this many times on Buzzard Bay or Camp Cod. About a week after Dorothy left, Lt. Caywood, Second Battalion Communication Officer, and Staff Sgt. Joe Cable, my radio section leader, and I were sent to Fort Pierce, Florida, to learn communications on ship-to-shore maneuvers: how the division would communicate with the U.S. Navy. The Navy had different communication set-ups than we had, and we had to learn how to tie our communication in to the ship's communication.'

'We were down in Fort Pierce for two or three weeks. It was a lot different from the fifty below weather in New York at Pine Camp. We made friends with some of the navy people. The navy had to

land us in boats and bring us ashore, and we had to learn how to communicate from the landing boats back to the ship. We also had to learn how to contact any people who had already landed ashore so we could determine the situation. We had to work out all of those things. The training was very interesting.' (Thomas, p. 57)

While this group was in Florida, their unit moved from Pine Camp to Camp Pickett. Upon arrival, Thomas updated his personnel on processes learned at Camp Pierce—information he would use during his four combat landings.

In addition to these duties, Thomas was asked by Major Bliss, the S-3, to guide the engineer company through the machine gun infiltration course and it rained throughout his four barbed-wire instruction duties. Other training followed at Arnold Valley and Camp Patrick Henry and Norfolk, Virginia.

EMBARKATION

'We left Camp Patrick Henry early on the morning of 4 June and before the day was finished, the 180th Infantry and perhaps the 45th Division were loaded aboard the ship at Hampton Roads port of embarkation, Newport News, Virginia. On June 8 the convoy steamed out of Chesapeake and headed eastward—alerts for U-boats were constant.' (Thomas, pp. 64 - 66)

Physical training continued on deck while games of chance were held below deck. As the convoy entered the Mediterranean, the Spanish coast could be seen on the left side—a reminder that war had become a reality—training days were over.

NORTH AFRICA AND SICILY

Their ships arrived on June 22 and June 24, the 180th Infantry in a cadre of four ships moved to a point right off the Algerian coast.

'Our regiment, operating with the regimental combat team, moved from the ship to the beaches in landing barges, LCVP's. After the mission of capturing some high ground, we marched to a bivouac area about three miles from where we had landed. Again, the navy combat team landed us erroneously. It had been stressed that as soon as we landed, we must drive inland without a letup.' (Thomas, p. 70)

On July 1, during the night, they were moved by truck to Oran, re-embarked and celebrated July 4 on board. July 5 the convoy left the port and on July 6 were informed that the 45th Division would participate in the invasion of Sicily. On July 10, the men were told to change from their wool olive drab uniforms and '*for the first time in about a year and a half, the old red and gold insignia of the Thunderbird was on our left shoulders again.'* (Thomas, p. 71) Specific actions, including those of Lt. Thomas during this campaign, were detailed within this section of the book.

OPERATION HUSKY – CODE NAME FOR THE INVASION OF ITALY

In keeping with military tradition, Oscar Thomas included a section in his book on the combat landing of the 180th Infantry. The inset in his book *'is an excerpt from an old 45th Division News(paper) that tells in a few words the invasion and the part the 180th Infantry played in the winning of the war in Sicily.'* (Thomas, p.67)

"The 180th Infantry Regimental Combat Team (RCT) included the 171st Field Artillery Battalion, Company C 120th Engineers, medical personnel from the 120th Medical Battalion, and attached non-divisional units.

The assault plan for the 180th RCT included seizing the Biscari (also spelled Biccari) Airfield, preparing blocks on the main north-south highways, maintaining contact with the 179th RCT on its right and the 1st US Division on its left, then advancing to corps objectives. Initially handicapped by being placed on a front of more than 12 miles, on 10 July the RTC assembled and stopped below the high ground just south of Highway 115 where it received small arms, mortar, and artillery fire.

Initial advance was not obtained, but later engagement with the Hermann Goering Division proved successful. The 180th then secured the Biccari Airfield, capturing enemy planes and other equipment. Deployed along Highway 124 or the Caltagirone-Grammichele-Vizzni more firefights proved successful.

Other engagements included successful movement to the rear of the 1st US Division, being positioned on the left sector of II Corp, support of the 2nd Battalion, capture of a large supply point on the island along the railroad southeast of Roccapalumba, and the mission to send a patrol into Palermo.

The 180th was relieved by the 157th on 28 July and passed into division reserve. On 30 July, the 45th Infantry Division was relieved by the 3rd US Division and passed into the Seventh Army reserve and given the mission to guard the coastal road. The division assembled in the area of Termini,

Immerese, and Cefula for rest and refitting. "Operation Husky" was over. The invasion and capture of Sicily had been a great success." (Thomas, pp. 67 – 69)

NEXT STOP, SALERNO

During September, preparations were in progress for the move to Italy. Ships were loaded by September 13, with navy destroyers visible as guides. Landing near an old Grecian town called Paestum, LST's containing the 36th Division could be seen—some with battle scars.

Thomas' group was now part of the American 5th Army, commanded by Lt. Gen. Mark Clark. Counterattacks by the Germans were repressed as the American regiment moved to an assembly area. Present also were supply ships, unloading tons of ammunition, food rations, vehicles of all descriptions, etc. With a few moments of free times made available to them, Thomas and another lieutenant named Gerhart decided to take a quick swim in a nearby stream. Finding themselves in the midst of an air battle, they quickly dressed, thus ended their skinny-dipping R&R.

A possible withdrawal was discussed, but after Division Commander Maj. Gen. Troy Middleton's remark, the whole unit followed suit:

> *"Gentlemen, I did not come here to get run off this beachhead, and if you will just give me my division, I think we can do a lot about this problem. If you all are determined to leave, just put ammunition and rations ashore for us. The 45th is staying".* (Thomas, pp. 83 – 84)

Thomas' job was to set up communication with 5th Army Headquarters for communications, signal operations, and signal equipment. Other orders replaced this one as the unit received those to relieve the 157th combat team, whose mission entailed driving German units away from the shoreline. Thomas recorded that this plan implemented by Middleton proved successful.

STUNNED

> *'Present with the 1st Battalion commander as this unit approached its objective, I was with the leading company with my radios and wire laying section, along with Sgt. James Hayner, wire chief for the 1st Battalion. Our lead company was sending out patrols to contact the enemy and they received fire, causing our troops to disperse while being hit with German 88 artillery fire. A tree burst*

came in and I went down and out. I was wounded but not unconscious and felt I had been hit in the head with a ball bat. Through the upper portion of my helmet, there was an ominous-looking hole. A fragment of a shell had torn its way into my helmet, my helmet liner and produced a painful scalp wound. A fragment also hit the S-3 officer in the hand.' (Thomas, pp. 85 – 87)

Thomas was stunned but only momentarily paralyzed. After making contact with the S-3, Oscar maneuvered his body toward a shallow aqueduct, feeling returning in his hands and right arm, but none in his left arm or part of his left leg. Hyperthermia was only beginning to worsen his condition when, thankfully, medics arrived to assist the wounded. Later, when ambulances made their way across the terrain, Thomas was able to walk, and while being guided into an ambulance, he was asked if he could yield his place to a severely wounded man. After stepping aside, the ambulance was hit by an artillery shell as it moved away—again, fortune had saved his life.

Later, taken to an aid station and given medical attention from a surgeon, Thomas heard the following: *"This lieutenant was very fortunate because if the shrapnel had been an eighth inch deeper, he probably would have died."* He never regained full feeling in his left hand. (Thomas, pp. 85 – 89).

Injured a second time by tent poles falling against his neck during a storm, he was transferred to the beachhead hospital and gained strength by walking through other areas, looking for those he knew. By early October and still wearing a head bandage, Thomas was restless to return to his regiment. While traveling via jeep to the place where he was wounded, he noted Italian families walking along the roads:

'It seemed to me that these Italians had no past and very little to look forward to in the future. They just plodded along taking nature in its course, and nature provided an ever-increasing population. The households generally had a goat or two and a few half dozen dirty, undernourished kids. And they all lived together in a little two-room stone house.' (Thomas, p. 91)

BENEVENTO

Rejoining his regiment in early October, he noted the capture of towns along the way to Benevento as it was being secured by the 157th Infantry. Humor often finds its place in many events—even those involving war. Benevento housed a large winery which took a direct hit, causing its great casks to empty their contents along the streets. Thomas found his friend Gerhart filling two

five-gallon water containers and after the regiment was put on reserve, this gift was shared with others.

> *'The route of advance of the 45th was down the Calore Valley toward the Volturno River. Our troops were on the north side of the Calore, the 34th on the south side . After a firefight between German forces and our 2nd Battalion, Lt. Col. Cochran was wounded and replaced by Col. Dulaney. As communications officer, I spent much time in the Command Post keeping up with the movements of the troops so I could supply good communications, and just about any part of the night, Col. Dulaney was present. Our regiment was successful through Dulaney's leadership of the battalion commanders to press forward.'* (Thomas, pp. 93 – 94)

VOLTURNO

> *'I mentioned the Calore River, which runs generally west through a U-shaped valley and curves into the mountains, flowing into the famous Volturno River. Our route of advance was down this Calore River toward the Volturno. The 34th was still on our flank and we were advancing side by side. During this march up the valley, our intelligence officer, through information from a German prisoner, stated the Germans would open a huge arial offensive. Prior to this time and since we had passed through the Salerno beachhead, there had been little evidence of the German Air Force. Sure enough on October 10, the German aircraft made their appearance by strafing and bombing attacks over the 45th Division area. However, the numbers indicated by the German were incorrect. It seemed as though the airplanes' main objectives were the "Long Toms" which were 155 mm field cannons. But the Germans failed to knock out these guns which were successfully supporting our advance.'*
>
> *'I had many problems with our communications because it was a wide valley, and the road leading to the targeted mountains ran along the Volturno River. Colonel Dulaney, my brother Albert, and a small section of our communications platoon were moving behind one of our advance units. German planes strafed a battalion of troops following our advance.'* (Thomas, pp. 94 – 95)

Communication issues, near accidents, and land mines were constant problems to be overcome as patrols were dispatched to locate Volturno River crossings. Multiple patrols requiring radios made tracking complex, so while

their regiment was again placed in reserve, radios were repaired and wires were resupplied along with replacements for those soldiers killed or wounded.

> '*Around the last of October, our regiment received orders from Division for a movement to the forward assembly area across the Volturno River to seize an initial objective which was Presenzano, then advance to the vicinity of San Pietro, a town on the approaches of Cassino. Our regiment was bivouacked in the outskirts and surrounding fields of Piedmont d'Alife. The date: October 31—pay day.'* (Thomas, pp. 96 – 97)

VENAFRO

> '*From the time we left Salerno, the advance of our regiment had been steady, but rapid movement was soon to end. Either by reason of necessity or error in judgement on the part of the high brass, the next phase was Venafro. It was in the cold mountains of Venafro-Cassino sector that Bill Mauldin's "Mud Mules, and Mountains" and "Joe and Willie" cartoons originated as mules were often used to resupply the troops. This was the land of Ernie Pyle's "GI Joe".'* (Thomas, p. 98)

Located among the Apennine Mountains of Italy, they were very steep and contained some of the highest peaks. Landscapes provided excellent cover for surprise attacks and roads north became valuable resupply routes for the Germans. Another brother, Pott, was also a communication officer with the 2nd Battalion and received a field grade promotion. Their family was also represented with another member, James Hayner, who worked with Pott.

> *'Our battalion was successful in capturing this town after a stubborn German defense with repeated counterattacks. These Germans were paratroopers and their morale was high. They were eventually thrown off the ridge, and our battalion established defensive positions around the town. It gave the regiment an excellent observation post to acquire artillery and to observe German movements.'* (Thomas, pp. 98 – 99)

Thomas remembers that one of the switching panels which held sixty lines was attached to an olive tree the age of which was at least a thousand years.

> *'My fountain pen was one of my essential possessions. Every time we got the chance, we soldiers took the time to write letters home. We knew the more we wrote, the more letters we would receive during mail call. To save mail costs, American soldiers used V-*

mail (Victory mail) to correspond with our folks back home. We were given small sheets of paper, later censored, copied to film, and printed back on paper. I wrote as often as I could, sending Dorothy love letters as often as possible and V-mails to my folks, my sisters, Dorothy's family members, hoping they would write back. Ma wrote me that Joe Borovetz, our postman, would wait until the women had opened their V-mails to find out the latest news from the Thomas brothers sisters' husbands on the war front.' (Thomas, p. 105)

Descriptive accounts throughout this chapter concerned the difficulty of suppling soldiers up and down the lines with munitions, meals, medics and other supplies. Ranger battalions and the 36th Division were integral partners in keeping and holding positions.

One of the most interesting accounts concerns one of Lt. Pott's switchboard operators:

'*On a night when nothing was happening, he was shocked almost to the point of nervous frustration by two Germans tapping him on the shoulder and inquiring in broken English as to where they could give themselves up. They had followed a wire line in. Nothing is impossible in war.'* (Thomas, p. 110)

'The Stars and Stripes published an article about 70,000 members of a labor union going on strike in the United States for their "rights" (actually the rights for just a few more cents an hour in their wages). It was kind of hard for a combat soldier on $60 a month, his feet wet and numb, his body cold, and his best buddy lying dead a few yards away, to figure out any justification for a strike in a defense plant or related job. The German radio also made the most of the strike back home.' (Thomas, p. 110)

On January 3, 1943, Thomas' regiment was relieved by a French expeditionary force, then marched to Lagone. Time spent "down" meant repairing equipment, cleaning weapons, training replacements, and correcting deficiencies noted in recent combat. Thomas focused on communications transmissions and repairing his equipment. '*After returning to the U.S. I learned that I had been awarded the Bronze Star for performance of duty as regimental communications officer between September 12, 1943 and January 15, 1944.*' The commendation stated, "*During this period Lt. Thomas achieved an excellent standard of communication within his regiment, despite the difficulties presented by extreme weather and German artillery.*" (Thomas, p. 111)

January 22 arrived with the news concerning Allied landing on Anzio and Nettuno beaches. Thomas was making preparations for the embarkation of his platoon when Col. Dulaney sent word to see him. *"Captain Thomas, as of this moment, you are the commanding officer of Headquarters Company 180th Infantry."* This sent waves of congratulations through those who worked with him. (Thomas, p. 112)

> *'The next day our regiment moved to a staging area at Pozzuoli, where last minute plans were made. At noon, our regimental combat team started to embark in the port city of Pozzuoli on the north side of the Bay of Naples. Col. Dulaney and a large part of the regimental headquarters group embarked at Baia, three miles from Pozzuoli. Embarkation of all troops and vehicles was completed by evening and the convoy moved out to sea at 8 p.m. into the pitch-black night. The next objective was Anzio.'* (Thomas, pp. 112 – 113)

ANZIO

Anzio and its twin city, Nettuno, were greatly reduced to rubble by war's weapons because of their geography, as both were considered important beachheads. Protected by a cannon of great caliber, which the Germans had installed high in the Alban Hills, it was known as the famous "Anzio Express", known for its disruption of shipping and troop landings. In addition, they had excellent observation posts in the hills which covered activities along the entire shoreline.

> *'A small area of the beachhead made the statement "Dig or die" stressed during training, a stark reality. So, everyone dug in. The holes ranged from shallow, muddy slit trenches in the forward area to elaborate dugouts further back. We used our helmets to dig water from the slit trenches and even the dugouts. The hardship was indescribable. The misery unimaginable. Two of the best descriptions appeared in the writings of Ernie Pyle, the great friend of the Doughboy and the characters of the 45th's own Bill Mauldin. One of the readers of Bill Mauldin's cartoons in the states said he made his characters look like "tired old men" instead of American soldiers.'* (Thomas, pp. 115 – 117)

Regiment debarkation began on January 30 and by 5 pm the command post was operational. The 45th was to protect the beachhead with Thomas' group in the middle. Thomas stated that being a Company Commander was:

'a *learning experience for me and I was involved in unfamiliar situations including command post defense, camouflage, feeding of troops, morning reports, security, and many trivial details. I was not familiar with all the conflicts and tactical movements of our units as I normally would have been had I not been communication officer. I learned that fighting was terrific; there were often counterattacks by the Germans and attacks by our own units. Patrol activity was intense, and artillery fire and aerial attacks from the Germans were regular.'* (Thomas, pp. 117 – 119)

SOUTHERN FRANCE

Early on August 15, the regiment entered the landing boats and circled to rendezvous while enduring the roar of guns from the battleship *King George V.* Battalions landed safely near St. Maxine. Communications were established between the 1st Battalion and one from the 36th Division. Under heavy fire, the 36th did land on the beaches. Thomas' group landed without opposition and established communications with all units. A German prisoner was convinced to return to his unit with an American sergeant to talk surrender. This action saved lives on both sides. *'On August 17, our regiment spent its time assembling in the vicinity of Vidauban, thus ending the first phase of its invasion of France.'* (Thomas, p. 132) He gives credit for their advance to the French people who lived in non-liberated areas.

Concerning attacks on the towns of LePuy, Lambese and Pellsanne,

'by day's end half of our regiment was en route to an assembly area in the vicinity of Embrun. The remining half moved in and on the morning of August 24. Thus, the total distance covered in the move was 125 miles, constituting the longest single advance made by our regiment in history.' (Thomas, p. 134)

Such advances by the Americans taught then to secure the areas quickly and to expect German counter-attacks. His recollections describe encounters in multiple towns and hamlets – their mission '*to maintain active patrolling and reconnaissance of the road net leading from the passes out of Italy'.* (Thomas, p. 135) In the French Alpine country, the Allies were welcomed with Tricolor, Old Glory, and the Union Jack hanging from their windows mere moments after the Germans had abandoned the area. Captain Thomas and his team worked constantly to establish communications.

'The campaign in southern France had become a race, with the Germans withdrawing a great number of their troops and huge amounts of equipment up the Rhone Valley through Avignon,

Montliemar, and Lyons. They intended to escape through the Belfort Gap into Alsace and Germany. The Germans were undeniably good at retreating and delaying action, and to a considerable extent they obtained their goal. Nevertheless, their troops arrived at the Belfort Gap far fewer in numbers and less in equipment than the German command would have hoped.' (Thomas, pp. 128 – 137)

Thomas' platoon was diligent in its mission to provide updates and current conditions for both attacking units and support troops. His brother, Albert, was his constant companion and they often exchanged ideas about keeping communications flowing.

Functional vehicles are always a high priority in war—even those captured from the enemy. One such model even became a traveling liquor warehouse with wine, cognac, brandy, and other liquors "requisitioned" from the cellar of a destroyed hotel.

'*Our company never imbibed during our operations, but it was great to have just a sip of wine when we had a few hours of rest. Lt. Gearhart, still the executive officer of Headquarters Company, handled this job with perfection.*' (Thomas, p. 138)

'The battle for southern France had turned into a wild race. Tan-colored vehicles, carrying Nazi troops only a few hours before, now shuttled men from the three infantry regiments forward. It was a swift war and a war of roads. The Thunderbirds moved beyond resort villages, past the scrub pine hills, over the baked clay in the valleys. There was resistance—strong points where the disorganized enemy attempted a resistance out of chaos. One thing about it. For the supply of communications men, it was the toughest sort of combat. Major General Eagles made this remark to his command: "I believe one of the chief features of the campaign has been the magnificent response of the communications and transport personnel. The speed of the advance obviously put a tremendous strain on them. Often there was more advancing than fighting. They have done splendidly." When I told my platoon about this remark, they cheered loudly.' (Thomas, p. 142)

CAPTURED

The date was September 8, 1944. When learning that a group including his brother, Albert, had been sent to an area near Baume Les Dames to establish a command post, Captain Thomas joined pursuit due to reported machine

gun fire in the area. Realizing too late that they had passed an active German outpost and were now being fired upon by 40mm gunfire and a machine gun behind them, they were taken as prisoners. Unfortunately, some were killed in the action but several, including Gerhart escaped.

> *'The Germans separated Captain Finan and me from the enlisted men and took us back to their battalion headquarters for questioning. They searched us for weapons, ammunition, and whatever papers we had that might give them information about our unit. I am sorry to say that in my pocket was an envelope containing the attack orders for the 1st Battalion to capture Baume Les Dames. Oddly, sweat had sealed the envelope. The Germans could not understand how I knew what was going on if I had not read the attack orders. They left me with my watch, cigarette lighter and five or six cigarettes, then placed us on a truck and took us back to their division headquarters 25 kilometers from where we had been captured. We were taken into a large room in a nice building where tactical maps were attached to the walls around the room showing positions of all of our troops, both of the southern France area and the Normandy landings. The maps were large enough that I could identify all the United States and British units in our area.'*
>
> *'Following Finan's interrogation, I was taken into the same room where they asked me my name, told me that I was a regimental communications officer and lived in Muskogee, Oklahoma. His next questions concerned the positions and size of our troops and the type of equipment. My answers included rank, name, and serial number. After repeated questions with the same answers, he used the old interrogation trick of saying that Captain Finan had already given him this information. My answer was that since he has already told you, there is nothing I can add.' A*fter being returned to the common area, Finan told him that they were being moved because they offered no new information. (Thomas, pp.145 – 147)

Repeated interrogations held two surprises: a warrant officer who spoke American English had been to Muskogee many times, worked for the Pittsburgh Glass Company for nine years, and was visiting his parents in Germany when the war broke out. His job in the German military was as an interpreter. The second surprise concerned a cipher wheel which had been used as a training tool and bore no resemblance to the model used in the war.

Sequestered and fed in a compound with other POWs, they were loading onto a convoy truck with others and driven toward Germany. Strafed by American fighters, the men exited the truck and were foot marched several miles ahead after the planes left the area. Placed later in a POW corral, Finan and Thomas and several other officers were next placed in a German personnel carrier for the following two days. Forced next into a cattle car, they were then transported to Limburg, Germany. Hearing and sighting American bombers overhead, they shouted "Hurrah!" and were knocked down by the guards as punishment.

POW numbers increased as another 35 American officers and airmen were added to their group. They also noted that destruction caused by the bombers was repaired by the next morning. Crammed tightly into small rail cars, they knew the train was headed north. Strafed again by fighters, at least one man was wounded and removed, his fate unknown. According to Thomas, they spent a week in another POW camp between train trips. On board for hours at a time, they traded war and personal stories to pass the time. (Thomas, pp. 145 – 153)

ARRIVAL AT OFLAG 64: SEPTEMBER 29, 1944

Grateful to exit the crowded conditions within the rail cars, they were marched through the front gates to their final POW destination, Oflag 64, a prison camp for American officers in Szubin, Poland. Upon arrival, each man was questioned by the camp commander or his representative about his family, where he lived, his unit, position and duties of his regiment.

ID cards were issued which contained his picture, name, rank, serial number and next of kin. He was also given German marks to purchase items from the PX and received American Red Cross Parcels issued monthly, though these deliveries became irregular. Thomas remembered the one he received on Christmas day 1944. *'Inside were cigarettes, powdered milk, canned meat, chocolate bars, plum pudding and crackers.'* (Thomas, p. 154)

> '*Behind a building known as the White House were barracks. We were all moved to one of the empty barracks and billeted. They were made from a substance similar to our concrete blocks and were divided into perhaps 16 cubicles and a large room across the back approximately 30 feet by 12 feet. Seven officers were assigned to each cubicle. The senior officer was cubicle commander and was responsible for conduct of those in his group. Being a captain, I was the commander of a group including six lieutenants: Ray Klinkenborg, De L. Hinckley, Roy Binger and three others. Capt. Finan, our regimental adjunct, who had been*

captured with me, was also a cubicle commander. (Thomas, pp. 154 – 155).

One of Thomas' duties involved updating news items to men in his cubicle. These originated from a secure room in the White House which housed a secret key-operated radio set.

> *'The radio picked up news each evening from the BBC in London, keeping us informed of the Allied movements and troop assignments, casualties, and progress of the war, which, interestingly, was different from the German news posted on the bulletin board at the White House. We were advised not to repeat what we heard as the Germans might realize that we had a radio.'* (Thomas, p. 155)

Thomas was surprised to learn that the Senior Ranking Officer (SRO) was the American Oflag Commander. His name was Lt. Col. Schaefer and he had been the battalion commander captured the day Thomas stormed the beach in Sicily. Visits commenced between Schaefer, Finan, and Thomas where they exchanged news about themselves and others in the unit.

> '*Charlie Dunn, a captain captured out of B company, came to see me daily and advised me about ways to get along with the Germans, about the food we could expect, and about the activities of the Oflag. He spoke about food rationing and about the gardens.'* (Thomas, p. 156)

> *'The rations the Germans supplied were black bread, potatoes, ersatz coffee made from parched barley, red cabbage, and rutabagas. Once a month each of us received a cube of oleo margarine and a small cup of sugar. These rations were prepared by our own people in our POW kitchen and rationed by them to the 250 POWs in the camp. The German rations, Red Cross parcels, and little gardens were barely sufficient to stave off hunger. As time passed, the rations became smaller in quantity, and the pinch of hunger began to strike us.'* (Thomas, p. 157)

Activities were available to occupy their minds as officers were not required to work unless it included volunteer duties in the kitchen or food gardens. Games, sports and reading were among the most popular pastimes. The POWs were also allowed to write one postcard a week and an extra one at the end of the month.

The winter months were cold and miserable for everyone; fortunately, a "camp grown" theatre group produced plays and camp musicians (with instruments provided by the International YMCA) held concerts. These provided well received distractions for all who attended.

Thomas remembers the special Christmas dinner where the kitchen did its best with food from Red Cross parcels and other shared foods to make it as cheerful as possible—at least the 250 men ate well. Around this time, the men at Oflag learned about engagements later called the Battle of the Bulge. Dozens of survivors began arriving at the camp, increasing their numbers to more than 650 men, resulting in crowded barracks and even less food.

When a higher-ranking American officer arrived, Col. Schaefer lost command, but still checked the bulletin board for the news. After reading the latest posting and being fluent in German, he threw this piece on the ground, refuting the German based report. Officers recently captured at the battle had shared with him the real status of the war and that the end was near.

> *'As a result of his tirade, Schaefer was arrested and confined in a three-by-three sweatbox with an opening at eye level approximately four by eight inches. Col. Schaefer was still abusing the Germans in their language and after many hours, he called one of the German officers over to his little window. The Colonel had defecated and holding it in one hand, he reached through the little hole, pulled the German's face to the opening and smeared it across the German's face. For this incident, Col. Schaefer was court-martialed by German officials and sentenced to death.'* (Thomas, p. 164).

[An article in the *Baltimore Sun,* May 21, 1945 reported that Col. Schaefer had removed insulting posters from the bulletin board which accused Americans of being gangsters, violating treaties within the officers' camp. Treated harshly and placed in solitary confinement, he was within several days of his execution when American troops freed him at Colditz Castle.]

In January 1945, cannon fire could be heard, accompanied with the news that the Russians were near. Informed by their captures to gather their gear, the camp of 700 officers prepared to march through the main gates—destination unknown.

The worst winter in 50 years greeted them that day. While others were pulling sleds containing their possessions, Thomas' keepsakes consisted of the following items: 'two German blankets, a knife, fork, mess kit, fountain pen and his watch.' By nightfall they had marched about fifteen miles and spent

the night in a large barn. The meager meal consisted of bread and ersatz coffee. Spreading their blankets over the barn hay, they slept close together for warmth. This became a routine for the next three days. On the fourth day, while marching through a small village, the snow was so dense that Thomas decided to slip between buildings. There in a small room, he found a Polish woman who offered him bread with lard. Recaptured by the guards, he was quick marched to the retreating group.

The march continued, increasing the misery of those who tried to keep up. That night, their "hotel" was an empty Polish POW barracks. Some men could not continue the march because of their frozen feet and were loaded on trucks, but Thomas was not among them. Determined to escape, he hid in a potato bin until the marchers had left and was happy to find that three of his cubicle mates had escaped as well. Luckily,

> *'they discovered a building the Germans has missed which housed a half-quarter of beef, many loaves of black bread, a small sack of oatmeal, and a five-pound sack of powdered sugar. All slept that night well fed. The next day surprises continued as Charlie Dunn, a 180th Infantryman who had befriended me, showed up with buddies and by the next afternoon, their numbers increased and the food was gone.'* (Thomas, pp. 168 – 170)

Climbing a nearby hill the next morning, they watched a battle between the Germans and the Russians. Returning to their building and hiding in the basement became a life-saving decision for when the Russians arrived, they obliterated the upper floor with their weapons. One American officer who had appeared the previous day spoke Russian and shouted, *"Comrades, we are Americans."* This stopped the gunfire and as the group ascended the stairs, they were handed weapons with the statement, *"Let us go get the Germans."* Declining their offer and asking for a map, the Russians left and the group decided to head for Warsaw. (Thomas, pp. 170 – 171)

THE POLISH WANDERERS

Each day the size of the group changed as more Americans joined them, then broke off into smaller groups. Eventually, it was reduced to Captain Dunn, Thomas, and his three cubicle partners. Encountering a Russian major, they enquired about food, and as luck would have it, they were treated to cooked pork and multiple vodka toasts to Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin. The men do not remember sharing the meal, but were lucid enough to accept his offer of cheese and bread from the major's rations and decline his invitation to join him on his trek. The Polish people they encountered were generous with their food, often exchanged for American goods.

'*A day or two later we hitched a ride on a Russian two-and-a-half-ton truck. We were in the middle of a prairie covered with snow, and the road was just a small lane cut by trucks. The vehicle in front was a similar American truck pulling a 155 Howitzer. The Russian soldiers were punching each other and jumping in the back end of the truck when one fell out. The driver of the vehicle stopped the vehicle and came back, I assumed to help the injured man. He was gasping for breath, blood running from his nose and ears. Instead, they took his wallet, wristwatch and boots, climbed back in the vehicle and moved on, leaving him in the snow. As our driver progressed down the road, he continued in the ruts cut in the snow and ran over the man. This story now, as I think of it, seems bizarre, but at the time, seeing the actions of war, it just seemed normal.'* (Thomas, pp. 174 - 175)

In February, the group of five arrived in Lodz, Poland, inquiring about catching a freight train to Warsaw.

'*We started down one side of the railroad track when I noticed a man who looked just like my brother Albert walking along. Squinting, I could not believe it! It was Albert! Excited, I yelled to him and he answered back just as excited. We met in the middle of the railroad tracks, hugging each other. We had not seen each other since the day we had both been captured and separated six months earlier. Of course, from then on until we returned home, Ab and I stayed close together.'* (Thomas, pp. 176 – 177)

After an unsettling stay at another POW camp in which artillery shells blanketed the camp, Thomas' group made its way to Warsaw on the ever-present trucks. Joined by other Americans, they were still without food but did manage to find a hayloft which contained a sack of oatmeal and a carton of powdered sugar—a simple feast but an appreciated one. The next morning, travel via more trucks, they crossed the river into Prague. Dropped off at the Prussian "West Point", they were given rooms and food. Guests for about 10 days, they were fed rice and fish, a dish the Russians called *kasha,* and weighed. Albert and Thomas had lost about 35 pounds each.

ODESSA, A TRAIN RIDE AWAY

'The next day we were called together by Major Hall and informed that we would be transported by rail from Prague to Odessa on our way home. Loaded into two small boxcars—thirty to thirty-five in each, we headed south to Odessa for several days. Odessa was a thriving, Russian post lying on the Black Sea. There, we found

five or six liberty ships in the harbor. One was flying the American flag; the other flew a British flag, the Union Jack. Suddenly I heard a call from the deck of the ship flying an American flag. An American Indian aboard ship, a merchant marine, recognized me as I stood on the wharf and yelled, "Hey, Thomas! On New Year's Eve I saw your wife and little boy, and they are doing just fine." It must have been the third week of February. That was the first I had heard from or about my family in about seven months because I had not received a letter or package while in prison." (Thomas, pp. 181 – 183).

HOMEWARD BOUND

Embarked on a British ship and assigned to officer quarters, each officer was issued 25 pounds sterling (around $100 American) and told the ships store was open to serve them. Thomas remembers purchasing a carton of 25 Baby Ruth candy bars and several packs of cigarettes. Initially he planned to limit his candy consumption, but still feeling hungry, he ate them all and became immediately ill. This action was probably repeated because the POWs bought out entire supplies of sweets!

Days passed as they sailed through the Black Sea, past Turkey and Greece, and approached Port Said. A band onshore played, *Don't Fence Me In.* Assigned to rooms with beds, the men showered and headed to the mess hall for a real meal. Thomas' next action was to draw Dorothy a cartoon on a V-mail letting her know that he would be on his way home soon. After being cleared and turned over to the American authorities, Thomas with other ex-POWs sailed to Naples, Italy, where they were debriefed again, given a physical and issued new uniforms.

'On the last day of March, I boarded an American ship in Naples harbor and started our journey to the USA in great style. I do not remember much about my trip home except the anticipation of seeing all of my loved ones. We were given good cabins. Our meals were well planned and tasty and we had coffee, cookies and doughnuts available at all times. By the time I reached home, I weighed 180 pounds.'

'Arriving at Boston harbor on April 9, 1945, we were transported to an army base in Brookline, Massachusetts. We were again questioned by the authorities and paid our money for the first time since we had been POWs.' (Thomas, pp. 187 – 188)

Thomas remembered the tears he felt when he was able to reach his family by phone and talk to both Dorothy and Wayne. It had been 23 months since their parting in May of 1943.

Receiving leave orders for April 13 and having purchased their train tickets, they were sitting in the officers' club listening to news about President Roosevelt's death when Thomas heard this news bulletin:

> *"We interrupt this program to announce that a severe tornado has hit the town of Muskogee in Oklahoma. Over 10 people were reported dead and several wounded. The area is under military control."* (Thomas, p. 189)

With phone lines inoperable and memories of the violent storms which had ravaged Oklahoma in previous years, Thomas and Albert made their way steadily westward toward Oklahoma, hoping to find their family members safe. Finally arriving early one morning, they found them secure, but their homes and possessions were spread over a ten-mile area. Fortunately, Dorothy had managed that morning to rent a house that survived, so at least they had a temporary place to call home. (Thomas, pp. 189 – 190)

NEXT ASSIGNMENT: FORT HOOD

After helping to rebuild his parents' home, Thomas and Dorothy decided to delay plans for theirs. In mid-June he reported to Hot Springs, Arkansas for rehabilitation and new orders. Reporting next to Fort Hood, there were queries about his status, but he was assigned to a tank destroyer school at Fort Hood as an instructor. Post housing was limited for a small family, but they were fortunate to find a livable trailer and made friends easily. Taking advantage of the officers' club pool and dining area, they enjoyed once again being a family.

> *'The tank battalion was holding classes for groups of officers and enlisted men as they were assigned to units. I had a class of sixty West Point graduates who were all ears for my instruction, and during our breaks, pestered me with questions about the rigors of combat and of the POW camp. My assignment was to teach tactics and most concerned communications. One afternoon I was assigned to teach a different group of officers, all members of a tank destroyer battalion that had returned from the war in Europe—training to go to Japan to carry on the battle in the Far East. Several high-ranking officers and many captains and lieutenants were in my class."* (Thomas, p. 195)

Observing immediately that the class was ignoring Thomas' instructions, he needed a plan. Dismissing the class early, he bought every ribbon along with eight overseas stripes available at the PX and asked Dorothy to sew them on the left sleeve of his uniform.

Wearing this impressive uniform the next day, their attention was immediate and after reciting some actions Thomas did not participate in, he revealed his true story. The class atmosphere changed at once and instruction continued. Later, as he was gathering his training aids, he noticed the general of the post behind him. *'My face turned red, and I immediately covered the ribbons, saluted the general and reported my name.'* Discussion about his deception followed, ending with the general's final comments, *"You gave a fine and creative instruction, Captain, and I want to congratulate you on your presentation. Forget about those ribbons."* Upon the general's departure, they disappeared immediately from his uniform. (Thomas, p. 197)

Called to the same general's office a few days later, this discussion resulted in a proposed promotion to major and a new assignment to Fort Knox to lead a newly developed communications instruction section. He was given a week to consider this next career move.

Reflecting on his experiences during his service years, Captain Oscar J.H. Thomas decided instead to *'cash in my points. Three days later, I received orders to report to Fort Chaffee to receive a separation from service. That was the end of my World War II career.'* (Thomas, pp. 199 – 201)

FINAL THOUGHTS

Autobiographies are often long and extremely detailed. This is a common practice among writers who choose this format because they are introspective about their experiences and fold this first-hand knowledge into the writing itself—especially in books like the one Thomas wrote concerning historic and catastrophic events which occurred between the years of 1939 to 1945 during a world at war.

Readers often internalize these feelings of being in the line of fire, symbolic representations of Mauldin's GIs and Ernie Pyle's writings as they contend with the mud and the blood—staying alive another day across an ocean and far from a place they call home.

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers in collaboration with Oscar J. H. Thomas' daughter, Janice Thomas Cramer