

## Thomas Denton Wallace World War II Veteran



In early December, we received a call from Post 200 SAL member, Tony Wallace who said he just finished reading our December – February newsletter and how much he enjoyed the article about Francis Coppersmith. He thought that his dad might have a story to tell about his military experiences. And what a story he had to tell....

Born June 22, 1925 in Hollywood, Md. to parents, Clyde H. Wallace and Effie E. (Joy) Wallace; his father was a (ship) carpenter and his mother, a housewife. His father died when Thomas was 9, almost 10 yrs. old. The family moved back and forth from the eastern shore to Baltimore to find work before his dad died. He had two brothers and three sisters, all of whom are now deceased. He remembers being very poor, especially during the Great Depression.

Every week or ten days, a truck from the welfare department would come down the street and give them food, like canned corned beef that they called “corn willie”, flour to make your own bread, and sometimes apples. Like so many families during these times, they had no heat or electricity. He liked school because at 10 every morning, he got a pint of milk and four graham crackers which was a real treat, since there wasn’t much breakfast at home.

Thomas only went to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7, 1941; his brother was drafted and left the next day so he had to quit school to get a job and help his mother. He found work at Koester’s Bakery at the age of 14.

At the age of 18, he was drafted into the Army on September 7, 1943. He wanted to be in the Air Force, but they needed men in the Army on the ground, so he was assigned to the Infantry Replacement Training Center. He reported to Camp Meade for about two weeks for shots, uniforms, haircut, etc. and spent the next 17 weeks in basic training at Camp Wheeler, Macon, Ga. From there he went by train to Camp Lee, Norfolk, Va. where he shipped out to go overseas aboard a Liberty ship headed to Oran, North Africa and from there to Italy.

He was assigned to the 88<sup>th</sup> Division, nicknamed by the Germans as the Blue Devils. A blue four leaf clover is the patch representing that division and worn on his uniform. It was one of the first all draftee divisions to enter the war.

His division landed in Bari, Italy and continued northward over the mountains. He had been assigned to the tank division, but with the mountainous terrain, there was not much use for tanks. Thomas said that after the amphibious landing at Anzio Beach; “All hell broke loose.”

Two days before the invasion of Normandy, June 6, 1944, his division was involved in and responsible for liberating Rome which you don’t hear much about. Rome was considered sacred and no one was supposed to bomb it, but the Germans did. After 21 years of fascist rule, Rome was finally liberated. After this, they were short on ammunition and morale and Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall came to speak to them. He told them that they may think that they were forgotten, but he let them know that they “fought like wildcats” and that they readily outclassed their German adversaries while measuring up to the best Regular Army divisions. They’d held down fifteen of Hitler’s best panzer divisions to keep them from going to the invasion.

His division had gone from southern Italy to Rome and north to the Po Valley, very near to Switzerland. He tells of one horrible time when someone was given the wrong coordinates and they were firing on their own. They fired a yellow flare which means friendly troops; cease fire, but that alerted the Germans, so that created a new problem. Tom said it was a hell of a mess.

Thomas got hurt on October 4, 1944. Records show that he was wounded outside of a small town, five or six miles outside of Rome overlooking Po Valley. As they were approaching a small town, they could see a small Italian style barn with a ditch in between ahead of them. Ten of his men made it to the ditch and took cover. They were ordered to head for shelter in the barn, which had already been shelled by the Americans as the Germans were still in the area. Alongside the road was what looked like a haystack, but it was actually a German tank with a 88 millimeter on it covered with hay. They made their way to the little barn just as that 88 millimeter landed in front of Thomas as he was standing in the doorway. He got hit in both feet with shrapnel as well as in his left arm. The medics picked him up and hurried to get him to safety, but the Germans were

still firing. At one point they dropped him along the road in order to take shelter themselves. He eventually made it to an ambulance where there was room for six wounded; 3 litters (military stretchers) on each side. He remembers the road had been shelled and was full of holes. When he wasn't passed out, he remembers the severe pain as the ambulance would run over those holes.

From there he was flown to a hospital in Naples for several weeks, and then he came back to the states on December 21, 1944; landing in Staten Island where he was taken to the Harlem General Hospital. By this time, President and Commander-in-Chief, Franklin D. Roosevelt had died and his Vice President, Harry S. Truman took over. Thomas spent 3 ½ years in hospitals; finally ending up in a hospital in Valley Forge, Pa. and had 40 operations and at one point his weight was down to 97 lbs. He had faced possible amputations, but fortunately his limbs have been spared, although he did lose a few fingers. He remembers receiving 'brown medicine' that he said burned like hell, but he thinks it was penicillin to get to the infection.

Shrapnel is still in his body in several places, but he continues to get around fairly well. He tells of having the Army issued pocket Bible in his left shirt pocket when he was hit and knows that it is what saved the shrapnel from hitting his heart.

Doctor after doctor would look at his legs and his arm; they would tell him he would never walk again, but Thomas proved them wrong. At times the pain in his arm was unbearable. Finally a doctor who trained in Florida at Tampa University told him that he would give him several shots in his shoulder and if it worked to temporarily ease the pain, that he could do surgery to give him relief. Finally, the surgery relieved his pain, by deadening some nerves.

Discharged on September 7, 1947 with 100% disability, Thomas couldn't do much in the form of work. He was depressed and started drinking heavily. They didn't know much about PTSD then that our soldiers suffer with now. He decided to take advantage of some of the programs that were offered to veterans. He went to the Veterans Institute at Eastern College where he got his GED and took commercial courses. He had a teacher who taught him how to type (because he didn't have any use of his left arm) by tying a ribbon from his leg to the shift key and when he needed to use the shift, he was to move his leg.

He also took some business law and accounting courses at the University of Baltimore while working at Baltimore Sales Book Company. He gained confidence and overcame a lot of his problems.

In January, 1952, he met his wife, Ernestine (Ernie) of 62 years. She was walking home from the movies with a friend and Thomas was driving by. He stopped the car and talked to her. He referred to her as "the cutest little thing he had ever seen". They were engaged in April and married in October.

About one or two years after he got out of the service, he joined the DAV. He went to meetings and found them very helpful. He served there as State Commander in 1988 and 1989. He started 3 Purple Heart Chapters; Glen Burnie #222, Baltimore Purple Heart #570 and Bel Air #571. He served on the Maryland Veterans Commission under 5 governors. He was Maryland's Veteran of the Year for the year 2002. He has served in many offices in the DAV, VFW, AMVETS as well as his home American Legion Post #256 in Parkton, Md.

He has many medals for his service, many proclamations and certificates but Thomas is most proud of his Maryland Purple Heart license plate and the certification that Governor William Donald Shaffer issued to him. His number is #00001.

By turning his focus to helping his fellow veterans through his work with the different organizations, Tom managed to work through his own Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. We enjoyed our time with Thomas and Ernie and we thank him for his service to our country and for sharing his story.



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*We do these interviews for those who have a story to tell. If you or you know of someone who would like to tell their story, please contact Elinore 410-374-4466 [efrush@live.com](mailto:efrush@live.com) or Mary Jane 410-374-9014 [maryjanewickline@comcast.net](mailto:maryjanewickline@comcast.net) or Liz at 410-239-4203 [larmacos@gis.net](mailto:larmacos@gis.net)*