

# Captain Wilbur Jackson Thomas

1920 – 1947



Wilbur Jackson Thomas was born October 29, 1920 in El Dorado, Kansas, to Edgar J. and Mabel Thomas. According to 1920 census records, he had an older sister, Margaret, and an older brother, Edgar.

The family lived at 211 West 1st Avenue, and then moved later to 516 N. Washington, in El Dorado, Kansas.

Blond, blue-eyed Jack was known to be soft-spoken, forthright, and dependable; friendly yet serious in his ways, with a determination to succeed. Always having a passion for airplanes and the art of flying, he developed his abilities rapidly when opportunity for training came. Later superior officers were quoted as saying that Jack took to flying naturally, with a “feel” for planes and an intuitive understanding of air technique. There is little wonder he became proficient in the air, performing with a certain dash and boldness.

During college, Jack was active in DeMolay, an organization dedicated to preparing young men for successful and productive lives by developing civic awareness, personal responsibility and leadership skills. Notable DeMolay alumni included Walt Disney, John Wayne, and Walter Cronkite. Thomas was cited for the DeMolay Legion of Honor, the organization’s highest tribute. The degree, however, was never conferred on him, as he became a marine flyer before the ceremony was held.

During a trip back home to the states at the end of 1943, Jack met Adele Kelly; they were married on Easter Sunday, 1944, in Glendale, California. The couple had six months together before Jack was shipped out on his third tour of duty.

Some knew him as Bill. Others knew him as Jack or as “Gopher Gus”, the Frank Miller cartoon character painted on the side of his plane. This character was the sidekick of “Barney Baxter”,

from Denver's Rocky Mountain News comic strip about a young teen with a burning interest in airplanes who became a flying hero.

A quiet person, not one to go out drinking and getting into trouble, those who did not personally know Thomas knew him by reputation. He was known to be a superb pilot, one who was steady under fire and highly respected.

While serving on Guadalcanal, Thomas came down with malaria, as did most of the squadron's personnel. A corpsman usually stood at the head of the chow line dispensing quinine tablets to the men.

Much of the men's lives in the Solomons were spent sandwiching activities between daily rain showers. When it wasn't raining, the hot tropical sun baked them. They lived with the ever-present mud, mosquitoes, giant fruit bats, and nightly air raids, as well as septic sores, hookworm and malaria. The only radio program coming in clear was provided by Radio Tokyo, full of misinformation concerning American forces.

Between strikes, the men found ways to relieve the boredom. On rare occasions, they obtained movies; other days they had horseshoe tournaments. Sometimes they practiced their marksmanship, firing "paint bullets" at a long "sock" pulled by one of the other pilots. One morning they played a double header of softball against the VMSB-132 and a Negro AA crew. They defeated the first team but lost to the second.

Compiling a record in the South Pacific that received national attention, Thomas first zoomed into the public eye when he downed five Japanese Zeros in the space of forty minutes. He was promoted to 1st Lieutenant in May of 1943, and rose to the rank of Captain in February of 1944.

Before the end of the war, between "hitches" in the Pacific (probably early in 1944), Thomas spent some time testing planes in the Mojave Desert with Charles Lindbergh.

During a routine mission in January of 1947, Thomas was ferrying a plane from the Naval Air Station North Island to the Marine Corps Air Station El Toro, California. There was a severe winter rainstorm and his plane crashed into Saddleback Peak, about thirteen miles east of the base. Also killed in the crash was Master Sergeant Morgan W. Hopwood.

Weather, with low visibility, was almost certainly a factor in the accident, as local newspapers reported the violent storm as having extraordinarily high winds. Contributing to the accident was the lack of radar approach at El Toro; also, Thomas's plane lacked onboard radio navigation equipment. Thomas would have had to use a combination of timing, dead reckoning, and rapid back-and-forth tuning of his range receiver to determine his position.

It was accidents like this that prompted the Marine Corps to totally revamp instrument training and improve its navigation aids. During the war, 565 Marine aviators were killed in action, while 1,050 were killed in accidents, many weather-related. From these tragedies came the

radar talk-down ground controlled approach (GCA) and the ultra-high frequency Tacan, still in use today.

#### CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

In 1938, Jack was in the first class to graduate from the new high school building in the 500 block of West Central. He attended what was then known as El Dorado Junior College in the same building, graduating in 1941.

Growing up in El Dorado, Jack's small stature prevented him from excelling in athletics, but at the controls of a modern fighter plane, he became a titan. According to classmate Renden "Blue" Eastham, he was well liked, not a big kid but gutsy. "No one pushed him around. He was a cocky little guy." According to his brother, Edgar, Jack had always wanted to be a pilot. As a boy, he had collected model planes. The airfield to the south of town was a popular hangout for Jack and his friends.

In those days prior to America's entering World War II, the local college was one of many across the nation to take part in the Civilian Pilot Training program under the Civil Aeronautics Administration. This program, paid for by the government, was aimed primarily at building up a reserve of private flyers, to become potential military pilots. Private flight contractors, in Jack's case local flight instructor Erman White, conducted classes. Jack received his pilot's license in May of 1941.

When Jack was born, his father, Edgar Thomas, Sr., worked as a driller in the El Dorado oil fields. Later, he operated the Thomas Service Station located at 201 West First Avenue, with the help of Edgar, Jr.

#### LEAVING THE AREA

Before World War II, Jack spent his life in El Dorado. He left following graduation from the junior college to enlist in the Navy, before America's entering the war. His brother, Edgar, also entered the service, joining the Army. Like Jack, he served in the south pacific.

In late December of 1943, Jack's squadron returned to the US for reorganization and training. This enabled Jack to visit El Dorado while on leave. A grand community homecoming celebration was held in his honor. Local service organizations participated and the governor of the state presented Jack with a Gallant Chronograph Aviation watch as a gift from his hometown.

Following the end of the war, Thomas planned to remain in Marine Aviation, continuing to do what he loved. While stationed in California, he paid several visits to El Dorado.

## ACHIEVEMENTS

Thomas enlisted in United States Navy Reserves at Kansas City's Naval Recruiting office on September 18, 1941. Transferring to the Marine Corps Aviation Unit, he began his training at the Naval Air Station, Corpus Christi, Texas. Attending an accelerated flight training program, he soon advanced to Second Lieutenant.

A couple months later, he reported to the Naval Air Station in Miami, Florida for advanced flight training. Following completion of pre-operational training in Dec. 1942, he was assigned to the 4th Marine Aircraft Base Defense Wing, operating in the Pacific.

In February of 1943, Thomas ferried his assigned F4F-4 over to Naval Air Station Pearl Harbor on Ford Island. From here, aircraft and pilots were loaded aboard the USS Nassau to be transported to the South Pacific. After twelve days at sea, all aircraft, with their pilots, were catapulted off the Nassau. They flew for 2 ½ hours to Turtle Bay on Espiritu Santo Island, at that time the Marines' main base in the New Hebrides.

In March, the pilots were introduced to their new fighters, the Vought F4U-1 Corsair, as it came into service for the first time. Although larger than the Wildcats and considered unsuitable on aircraft carriers, the maneuverable Corsairs could obtain tremendous speed. According to fellow pilot Edward Shaw, the Corsair could "outfight any Jap plane that ever got in the sky."

Jack was transferred to the Marine Fighting Squadron 213 referred to as the VMF-213. Serving as a fighter pilot with this group throughout the war, he also flew the F4F-4's, a heavier plane with folding wings to store better on aircraft carriers. On May 6, 1943, Jack test-flew one of the Corsairs to a remarkable altitude of 35,000 feet.

After some early confusion during the switchover to Corsairs, operations were begun in earnest from Henderson Field in April. The squadrons went into battle having had less than ten hours flying experience in their new planes.

While learning the geography of the Solomons, typical missions involved escorting bombers up to the enemy stronghold of Bougainville. Jack's squadron moved up to Guadalcanal, flying regular combat missions, sometimes two per day. They made more than 100 strikes against numerous installations around New Georgia, Kolumbangori and Bouganville.

For action against an enemy Japanese force in the Solomon Island area from June 18th to July 18th, 1943, Thomas was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. The citation accompanying this award read: "Separated from his flight of Corsairs during an engagement with fifteen enemy Zeros, 1st Lieutenant Thomas unhesitatingly launched a daring attack on seven of the Japanese fighters, and despite overwhelming odds, maneuvered his plane with such skill and fierce determination that he destroyed four of the hostile craft.

“Later, he contributed greatly to the success of a strafing raid on an enemy cargo ship which was left burning and sinking. On another occasion when his flight of four fighters intercepted a large formation of enemy bombers and zeros, he sent one bomber and one fighter crashing in flames and, cleverly avoiding an attacking Zero, maneuvered into striking position and destroyed a third hostile plane.”

At the end of the squadron’s first tour of duty came six weeks rest and recuperation in Sidney, Australia. Then, in June, Thomas ferried an F4U-1 formation of eight more pilots to the “Bevy” airstrip on Guadalcanal, taking nearly four hours. From here, they flew support for the landing of ground troops in New Georgia, a well-known operation remembered as Operation Toenails under the command of Vice Admiral William F. Halsey.

It was during this second combat tour that the squadron dubbed themselves “The Hellhawks,” after the native hawks flying over Guadalcanal.

Of the original group of about thirty pilots sent out from Hawaii for combat duty, there were only ten left after the first duty. They didn’t pick up replacements until the third tour so there was about three or four months where the ten of them were doing to job of thirty.

With a hunter’s sense of instantly taking in his surroundings and assessing the situation, Jack became an aggressive, risk-taking spirit with unmatched skills in gunnery. Referred to as “Tail-end Charley” the sharp-eyed wingman, he flew six missions over Malaita and Segi in the New Georgia’s as the division leader’s wingman, a most enviable position.

On one mission, his engine quit when it was hit and lost all the oil; he went down with his plane about ten miles off Japanese-held territory, barely managing to get his lifeboat open and clear. He paddled for five hours to keep free of enemy positions. Picked up after ten hours, only three days later he was returned to his squadron just in time to make another flight. In total, he crashed planes four times during the war, twice on land and twice over the Pacific, surviving each time.

After a time of reorganization and training back in the United States, Jack’s squadron headed back to the war in September 1944, on board the Ticonderoga. Arriving in Pearl Harbor, they were assigned to the USS Essex along with the VMF-124 squadron, becoming the first Marine squadrons to augment air groups during the war.

Marines had flown from carriers since the 1930s, but had never been permanent members of the air groups for political, and occasionally tactical, reasons. By 1944, however, Marine fighter squadrons were flying from several ships, especially small escort carriers. By this time, the F4U Corsair had been cleared to operate from the American flattops.

On January 7th, Thomas led a target combat air patrol over northern Luzon in exceptionally foul weather. The group became separated, with three members reported missing in action. Two others were rescued after forced landings when their fuel became exhausted. Thomas alone found Aparri airfield and strafed it with machine-gun fire.

Leading another patrol on January 21st, 15 planes on Tsuina airfield were strafed, one of which Thomas burned. Returning to the Essex with low fuel, they were in the process of landing when attacked by enemy forces. Thomas and another pilot were forced to land aboard the USS Enterprise instead, but not before Thomas had shot a burst at the enemy.

The invasion of Okinawa began in April of 1945. The two squadrons aboard the Essex participated in action against Lingayen, Luzon, Formosa, Tokyo, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa.

One of Jack's better known exploits occurred during the first day of carrier raids on Tokyo. Thomas led a squadron of three Corsairs over the southern part of the city, daring the Japanese to "come upstairs" and fight. When four of them accepted the challenge, Thomas personally shot down two of them, while his mates took care of the other two.

During this third tour of duty, Jack scored two more kills in a mission over Tokyo in February. This brought his official count to 18 ½ Jap planes, plus four other probable hits, as well as 113 enemy ships, making Thomas the 7th best flying ace in the Marine Corps for both World War II and the Korean War.

At the end of the war Thomas continued to fly, with a group called "The Navy's Flying Might." After the war, the government needed money to finance the bringing back of people and equipment that was over and beyond the current war bond. The Navy recruited those pilots who had seen a lot of action as a booster squadron flying in aerial shows.

A temporary organization, they would simulate attacks and perform tricky maneuvers for crowds gathered for the air show. No admission was charged, but those purchasing war bonds were permitted to walk through the display of planes after the flying. Thomas achieved some fame throughout the country doing aerobatics in the F7F Tigercat twin-engine fighter.

Jack Thomas remained in the Marine Corp, stationed in Southern California doing what he loved to do until the time of his death.

#### AWARDS, RECOGNITION

Captain Jack Thomas received many decorations during his tours of duty. For his efforts as a fighter pilot, he was awarded the Navy Cross, two Distinguished Flying Crosses and two Air Medals, as well as the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal.

An exhibit in his honor was featured at the Santa Monica Museum of Flight. He is honored in another exhibit in the Fighter Pilots Hall of Fame in Phoenix, AZ.

When the El Dorado airport was moved to its present site, it was known as the El Dorado Municipal Airport. In 1985, through the efforts of the El Dorado American Legion Post No. 81 and interested citizens, it was renamed the El Dorado / Captain Wilbur Jackson Thomas

Memorial Airport. The official ceremony was held on Veterans Day, Nov. 11th. "El Dorado" was kept on the front of the name in keeping with Federal Aviation Administration regulations.

During the ceremony honoring this top ace, Kansas Governor Robert Docking said that it was "fitting that Veteran's Day and the (210th) birthday of the American Marine Corps provide a background for the renaming of the El Dorado airport. The dedication of our armed services is seen clearly in men like Jack Thomas, who certainly did his part to protect and enhance the freedoms that we now enjoy."

In a special supplement published by the El Dorado Times on Nov. 8, 1985, a letter of commendation honoring Captain Thomas was reprinted, signed by President Harry S. Truman, in grateful memory of one who died in the service of his country.

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