

Veteran's Legacy Project: Thomas A. McKee

by Erin Broberg

Thomas Arthur McKee, the only child of Lee and Bessie McKee, was born on February 6, 1918 in Rapid City, South Dakota. The Black Hills of Thomas's childhood were riddled with the mineshafts and dwindling towns remnant of the Gold Rush era, but were yet untouched by the looming tourism boom spurred by President Coolidge's summer excursions and the carving of Mount Rushmore. Thomas spent his youth doing chores on his family's ranch; catching pigeons, muskrats, and trout to sell; and running off with his friends to play marbles in the dusty lot that is now Rapid City's Hotel Alex Johnson.

During his elementary years, Lee and Bessie divorced, and Lee moved away. Bessie soon married Richard Braithwaite, and they raised Thomas at the ranch. Bessie suffered frequently from mood disorders and paranoia, and Thomas often bore the consequences of her unstable behavior. Bessie could be verbally abusive and manipulative. She threw away the cards and birthday gifts Lee sent to his son, telling Thomas that his father had died. Thomas was unsure what had truly happened to his father until he met him again, in a town just three hours away, over fifty years later.

Thomas went to school in Rapid City, and worked on his family's ranch at Spring Brook Acres. After graduating from Rapid City High School in 1938, Tom began working in the men's suit department of J.C. Penney. He continued to live and work at the family acreage, but his mother's increasing manipulation and siphoning of his savings drew him to look for another way of life. As Thomas later told the story, he remembered walking up to a recruiter and saying, "Well that's a nice outfit." During the telling, Thomas would point in the air as if the officer was standing in his living room, nearly seventy years later, "How soon do you 'spose I could get into one of those?" The recruiter responded, "Well, we've got a group shipping out tomorrow. You want on it?" Thomas would say that they shook hands, and that was that. He enlisted on January 4, 1942.

The morning Thomas arrived at the Marine's Camp Elliot in San Diego, California, he would have stood in a long line as each recruit received medical and dental examinations. By afternoon,

each recruit received uniforms and post-exchange gear. Within six days he would be assigned to his platoon, a group of men he often recalled fondly. 2 For the next seven weeks, he would undergo intense training in bayonet instruction, military courtesy, scouting, and combat principles. His nights were spent at an airplane factory, where he spent hours constructing wings and engines for a silver dollar each day. 1

Thomas served in the Asiatic Pacific theatre from January 1943 until May 1944. He served in the French Caledonia Islands and the New Hebrides, arriving the same month the siege of Guadalcanal forced the Japanese to evacuate their base in the Solomon Islands. 3 Until the end of the war, the islands of New Hebrides served as a major supply and staging area for Marines. 4 Allied forces joined the Free Fighting French in French Caledonia, an island with few dirt roads delving into the thick, hilly jungles. The U.S. forces depended on small, quarter-ton, jeep-like vehicles to traverse the island, replacing traditional cavalry with their motorized infantry. 5 Thomas recalled driving such a Jeep for a general with whom he bonded over their shared love for horses. He would recall with a chuckle how this general had often invited him to eat with the other officers, cause quite a stir among the jealous Privates.

Thomas also spent his R&R period in New Zealand. When recounting the war, this trip is what fills the stories. His accounts were never tales of combat, but stories of the families that welcomed him and other marines to their homes for dinner, families whose own boys were also fighting elsewhere in the war. He tells of walking along the beach and spending hours with locals. He even helped them break wild horses from the Kaimanawa herd that still roams the wilderness of the island.

Although Thomas didn't emphasize combat in his stories, he was an accomplished veteran. Within the first eighteen months of service, Thomas had achieved Master Sergeant and was awarded the Good Conduct Medal. He became an adept rifleman and, by the end of his service he had achieved the Rifle and Pistol Marksman Award. He often spoke of his uniform and would brush the left side of his chest with pride when he described the "stripes" he had earned. Even in his last years, he contemplated heading down to the recruitment station, just to see if they would take him back.

Thomas received an honorable discharge and returned to South Dakota at his mother's insistence, only to find that she had sold the ranch and all his horses in his absence. He returned to his job at J.C. Penney, and began saving to buy a ranch of his own. There he loved the job and the people he was able to serve— it was said that he could tell anyone's size at a glance.

It was in that downtown J.C. Penny that local school teacher and rodeo clown, Martin Collins, introduced Thomas to his daughter, Darlene. The two were married in Hill City on June 2, 1947. Several years later, Thomas was transferred to the Havre and Butte, MT, J.C. Penney stores as manager, before settling back in Rapid City. After living in Rapid City for a few years, they purchased a ranch near Deadwood. The plans were to only spend the summer at the ranch until they got it set up. But, come August, the family decided that they did not want to return to town. Thomas bought three palomino horses— Topaz, Sugar, and Shirley— and began ranching.

Thomas and Darlene had nine children. Tom started every morning by dolling out nine stacks of quarters on top of his dresser—one for each child's lunch. He ended every evening on his knees next to his bed, lifting up his children, and eventually his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, in prayer. Thomas continued to work at J.C. Penney's for 48 years and never missed a day of work. Even when snowed-in, he would trek to the highway and hitchhike to work. Thomas met Mr. J.C. Penney himself and gave him a four-day tour of the Black Hills.

One day when Thomas was moving cattle up the lane, he began to have chest pain. That day, he went to the hospital and was told he had had a heart attack and underwent bypass surgery. Thomas recovered well from the surgery, but his mind slowly lost its sharp memory. Once known for being able to remember anyone's phone number off the top of his head, Thomas's short-term memory dwindled until he could not remember much longer than a ten-minute span. His long-term memory and physical abilities remained with him until he was 97, even after a strong bout with colon cancer.

When Thomas was 95, he got a phone call from his half-sister. After his birth-father had moved away, he had remarried and had five children, none of which knew about their half-brother in

South Dakota. After Lee's death, Thomas's sister, Wanda, was searching through records in their family attic and found Lee's divorce papers. She traveled up to the hills from her home in Michigan to visit her brother. After ninety-five years as an only child, Tom met his youngest half-sister.

Tom spent his last years on his ranch. He spent hours on the lawn digging up dandelions with his jackknife or on the porch lamenting how the pines were browning after the beetles had flown to the next patch. He would play Rummy at the card table in front of the fireplace, marveling at his grandchildren's ability to deal, telling them they should be dealing out in Deadwood.

As Darlene began to age, she slowly succumbed to Alzheimer's disease. Thomas would sit with her in the kitchen and help her eat her peanut butter toast, sit with her on the couch as they both nodded off into snores, and sit with her on the porch in the sunshine, singing "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" to her softly.

Thomas and Darlene were married for 68 years before he passed away in his sleep in the back bedroom of their Black Hills ranch home on Tuesday, March 1, 2016. He was honored at the Black Hills National Cemetery with a Twenty-One Gun Salute and is remembered by his family as a man who loved his life and the people in it.

NOTES

¹ Reni Nixon, "McKee, Thomas A." *Rapid City Journal*, March 4, 2016,

http://rapidcityjournal.com/obits/veterans/mckee-thomas-a/article_d5c07385-f80f-572e-9f57-3cabbcd20f9.html.

² Kenneth W. Condit, "Marine Corps ground training in World War II," *Washington, Historical Branch, G-3, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps*, 1956,

https://archive.org/stream/marinecorpsgroun00unit/marinecorpsgroun00unit_djvu.txt.

³ C. Peter Chen, "New Hebrides," *World War II Database*,

http://ww2db.com/country/new_hebrides.

⁴ "World War II Pacific Island Territories: New Hebrides (1941-43)," *Historical Boys' Clothing*, April 30, 2010, <http://histclo.com/essay/war/ww2/cou/island/pac/w2pi-nheb.html>.

⁵ "Our Troops in New Caledonia 1942 US Army 11min," *US Army film FB-34*, May 1, 2012,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBFOaKx5Fz0>.