

# Gordan H. Thomas

## U.S. Army Machine Gunner Protector



**Gordon R. Thomas**  
U.S. Army  
Christmas at Bastogne

Gordon Thomas Was Inducted Into The U.S. Army On March 15, 1944. He Wrote This Story For His Grandchildren Several Years Ago. I Graduated From Brown County High School In 1943. After 17 Weeks Of Basic Training At Camp Wolters, Mineral Wells, Texas, I Was Assigned To The 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry For Shipment Overseas. I Was Sent To Camp Cooke, Los Angeles, California. After A Month There, We Boarded A Troop Train For New Jersey And Then Spent 20 Days At Sea Taking The Northern Route To Southampton, England. Our 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry Division Went Into Combat December 15, 1944 At Bastogne, Belgium. The Next Day There Was 6-8 Inches Of Snow.

My Squad Of Twelve Men Consisted Of Two Men With 30 Caliber Machine Guns And Ten Men With 30 Caliber Automatic M-1 Gar-

and Rifles. My Assignment Was To Protect A Machine Gunner. We Had Been Told That Many Men Who Operated A Machine Gun Were Killed Within Thirty Minutes After They Started Firing. In Addition To My Rifle, I Carried Two Bando-liers Of Machine Gun Ammunition, Four Hand Grenades, One Under Each Arm In My Overcoat And One Hug On Each Side Of My Ammunition Belt. This Belt Also Supported Several Clips Of Rifle Ammu-nition, A First Aid Kit And A One-Quart Canteen Of Water.

Each Twelve-Man Squad Rode In Halftracks Until We Made Contact With The Enemy. At That Time We Dismounted And Scattered Leaving One Man To Fire The Fifty Caliber Machine Gun Mounted On The Front Of The Halftrack. Four Such Squads Made Up A Company And Four Companies Made Up A Battalion. Each Battalion Also Had Four Sherman Tanks And One Tank Destroyer Machine. You Can Now See Why We Were Called Ar-mored Infantry.

Each Night Every Man Dug A One Or Two-Man Foxhole. Usually, By Then Our Halftracks Were Close Enough To Us That We Could Retrieve Our Bed Rolls. We Slept With All Our Clothes On Inside Of A Sleeping Bag. The First Night I Left My Rifle Just Outside The Foxhole Think-ing This Would Keep It From Getting Dirt In It. The Next Morning, The Bolt To Open The Magazine Was Frozen Shut. I Had To Stand On The Bolt To Finally Get It To Work. Each Man Also Carried A Pick Called An Entrenching Tool To Dig Their Foxhole. Mistake Number Two—The First Day I Didn't Carry Mine Because When We Left Our Halftrack That Morning, We Were Told By Our Lieutenant That We Were Going To Take The Small Town A Few Miles Ahead And Would Probably Stay There That Night. However, The Town Was Too Heavily Defended And We

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Couldn't Capture It The First Day. We Pulled Back And Dug In. My Buddy And I Didn't Have Any Tools To Dig With, So We Had To Wait What Seemed Like An Hour And A Half To Borrow An Entrenching Tool From Someone Else. The Next Day I Was Much Smarter Having Learned The Hard Way. From Then On I Carried An Entrenching Tool With Me And Slept With My Rifle Inside My Bed Roll. Occasionally, We Would Find A Haystack Or An Old Barn To Sleep In Even Though We Were Warned That This Was Risky.

On Christmas Eve, 1944, We Attended A Nondenominational Service At A Catholic Church In Belgium In Full Uniform With Rifles Between Our Knees. On Christmas Day, Near Bastogne,

Our Battalion Was Deployed On A Back Slope Of A Hill Overlooking A Large Meadow. Our Tanks Were Positioned Near The Top, But Far Enough Down The Hill So That They Could Not Be Seen By German Ground Troops. The Rest Of The Battalion Was Dug Into Foxholes. There Were Several Inches Of Snow On The Ground And Shelling Had Ceased Apparently In Observance Of Christmas Although We Were Not Sure At The Time. Before Us Were The Remains Of Some Of Our Disabled Tanks And Dead Bodies, Mostly German, But Some Americans, Too. We Encountered Heavy Artillery Mortar And Machine Gun Fire, So We Pulled Back To Wait For Air Cover. It Turned Out To Be A Day Of Rest With The First Hot Meal We Had In Several Days, Turkey And The Trimmings.

An Unexpected Morale Booster Happened On Christmas Day When A Jeep Drove Up To With Fifty Yards Of The Very Front Line Of Foxholes. Standing Up On The Passenger Side Was General George Patton With His Pearl-Handled Pistols Strapped On Each Hip. As The Jeep Stopped, He Shouted A Few Words Of Encouragement To Those Closest To Him As The Jeep Turned Around And

Sped Back Down The Hill. Later, Our Company Captured Several Dozen Germans. They Would Usually Appear Out Of The Timber With Their Hands On Their Heads Shouting "Me Polish". The Majority Of Them Appeared To Be 16-19 Years Old.



On January 13, 1945, Our Company Was Pinned Down By Machine Gun Fire As We Walked Along The Edges Of A Wide Road Through The Forest. Our Lieutenant Radioed For Tanks. They Soon Came Along The Side Of Us With Tracks Clanking And Guns Firing. When The Germans Heard Or Saw This They Began To Fire Heavy Artillery Called 88's And Their "Screaming Memmies" Mortars. We Were All Lying Flat Trying To Get Under The Snow When I Felt A Sharp Pain In My Leg. It Seemed More Like Being Cut With A Hot, Sharp Knife. I Could Barely Move, So I Didn't Look At My Leg For Fear Of Passing Out.

When The Noise Finally Ceased, We Had Lost Seven Out Of Eleven Men In Our Squad. The Medics Carried Me Out And Put Me On The Back Of A Jeep. After Initial Treatment, I Was Transferred To The General Army Hospital In Nancy,

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**France. They Operated On My Right Leg Where Shrapnel Had Gone Through Between My Hip And Knee. I Have Never Understood Why The Leg Bone Was Not Broken. They Put A Cast On Me From My Lower Waist To My Ankle. A Few Days Later A Colonel Presented Me With A Purple Heart.**

**I Was Declared Unfit For Combat And Was Transferred Into The Ground Forces Of The 9<sup>th</sup> Air Corps And Sent To Gros Gerou, Germany And The Next Month To Darmstadt In Charge Of Supplies For An Air Base Of 5,000 Men. In April, 1946, We Were Disbanded, Sent To The Coast Of France And Arrived In New York After 12 Days At Sea. I Was Discharged Within 24 Hours After Arriving At Camp Mccoy, WS And Took The Train To Springfield Where I Was Met By My Mother, Dad, Brother Jim And Aunt Ima. Gordon R. Thomas Died At Age 77 On March 8, 2003 In Springfield And Is Survived By His Wife Evelyn.**

**Gordon R. Thomas  
Springfield, Illinois**