

Earl LeGrand Thomas

as interviewed by Judy Hansen
May 2014

I was born November 10th 1921 in Lehi to Morris and Salvina Checketts Thomas. I'm not sure if I was born in the hospital or at home with a midwife. I was raised in what they called the Lehi Junction. It was about as far north as you could get on the south side of the low hills. It was just above 21st North by Fox ditch. I went to school in Lehi but I didn't graduate. It was during the depression so I had to work. I went into the Provo CCC 958 camp (Civilian Conservation Corp). There was a CCC camp in Pleasant Grove and one in Provo; the CCC camps done a lot of work up in the canyons. I



helped build roads in both the Spanish Fork and Payson canyons. We use to have guys that could lay those rocks and make some pretty nice things. I worked for the CCC two years. I joined in October 1938 and worked until October 1940. I was about 16 years old. I got paid \$30.00 a month. The folks got \$22.00 and I got to keep \$8.00.

On June 14, 1941 I married Jack Colledge's daughter Gladys. Then the war broke out in December of 1941. I was working for the Union Pacific railroad. I worked for them about two years. If you ever heard of Gandy Dancing¹ that is what I done for the railroad. I use to tamp ties. They had a steel tool that I would use to tamp the rocks and dirt out of the railroad ties. Each man had to put in ten railroad ties a day. We had one foreman that always tried to make it as hard as he could. He would make us dig out by the side of the tie and then knock the tie over to pull it out. Some of the other foreman's would just have us raise the track, pull the spikes, then we'd just have to pull the tie out with little to no digging.

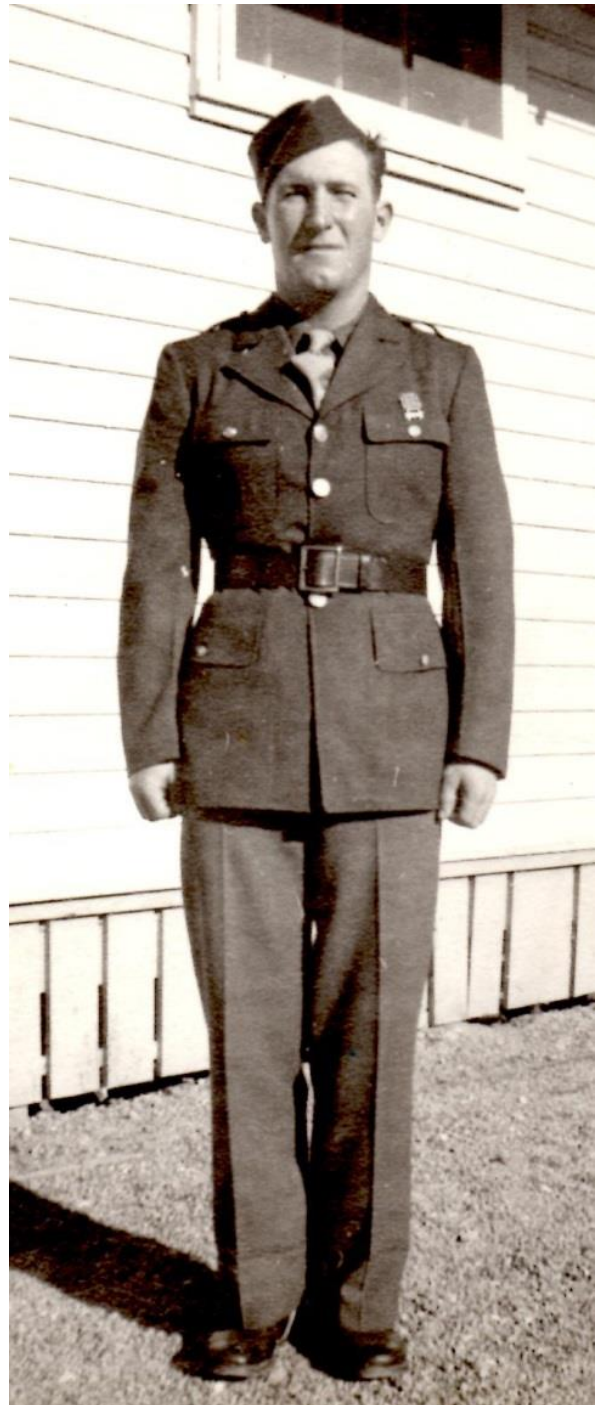
My wife was seven months pregnant when Uncle Sam came and said, "I want you" so I had to be in a certain place at a certain time. I was drafted in December 1942. The way it was scheduled I was supposed to have gone December 19 but it was so close to Christmas they said I could stay until the day after Christmas. They put me on a troop train and I left for Army boot camp December 26, 1942.

¹ The job of the gandy dancer refers to "track examiners" and their responsibilities were "checking ties, bolts, track, and roadbed for necessary repairs." However, most sources refer to gandy dancers as the men who did the difficult physical work of track maintenance under the direction of an overseer.

I went to Camp Roberts in California for infantry training which they called basic training. I was there for 13 weeks. After we took our training we were waiting in California to ship out. I tried to get a furlough but didn't get it until the day we shipped out, so there really was no furlough. I'll always remember the day we left. We went under the Golden Gate Bridge on the 11th of May 1943. I was on a Norwegian freighter that had been converted over to a troop ship. There were 2,800 people on that troop ship. It took us about 15 days to reach New Caledonia, a French island in the south pacific. We were the replacement people. In New Caledonia we had more training. Almost everyone was shipped out to the different islands where the biggest share of them got killed. They found out I had experience with the railroad so they kept me in New Caledonia from May 1943 to December 1944.

We were a Quartermaster outfit. I would drive trucks delivering things from one place to another. Once in a while we'd make a wrong move and take things to the wrong place. We would supply the Army, Navy, and different units. I also had to work on railroad repair. My duties would switch back and forth from driving trucks to working on the railroad. Our regular railroad tracks here are 56 inch gauge between the tracks but in New Caledonia they are only 39 inches.

When we shipped out the 3rd of January 1945 with a 100 ship fleet we stopped off at Finschhafen (Finch Haven) New Guinea on our way to Luzon, the largest island in the Philippines. There was a liberty ship right behind us that was struck by a Japanese Kamikaze pilot² and it killed 45 of our soldiers on that ship. I was on a LST³ and we had mostly trucks that we were carrying into Luzon.



² Japanese pilots that would take their aircraft and crash-dive into our warships killing themselves and whoever they could take out with them.

³ Landing Ship Tank.

It didn't take us too long to get to Luzon. We got there about 4:30 in the afternoon. We didn't know where we were at or what was going on. About 9:00 that night; of course it was dark, we could hear a battery of 155's and 240's; you know, the big guns. We didn't know if they were coming in or going out. This was right at the start of the Battle of Luzon. It was kind-of scary there. When we first went into the island I was lucky enough to get on guard; if you can call it that. There was a lot of shooting going on. The Marines were already there as well as a lot of Japanese. The next morning they had about 80 dead Japanese soldiers stacked up. The Marines just kept killing them as they went by. I was there until September 1945; about 9 months.

They shipped us into the Philippines in September. We went through Manila up to a place they call Guimba; it's just a little tiny place. We had to round up and get those Japanese that were literally starving to death out of there. The Japanese wouldn't come out and they were dying. It was sad. We were railroad so our troops never did go up in there but these Japanese were brought out and put on our railroad cars and that is how we would get them out. If they could they would ship the dead soldiers back to the Japanese.

That is where I stayed until I shipped out to South Korea. I had enough points I could come home. I spent 31 months overseas. I was on the high seas around Thanksgiving time of 1945. We went up around the Aleutian Islands; that is some cold rough seas, and into Tacoma, Washington; that is where I boarded a train home. I got into Salt Lake about 2:00 in the morning, caught a bus, and came home. I got home December 19, 1945.

There were no telephones and the ones available had eight to ten homes on a party line. Not everyone was on that party line. I couldn't call home so I just came and surprised them.

Before I had left for the service, we had been renting a little place in Draper and we tried to buy it but they wouldn't sell it to us. When I left Gladys went and lived with her mother. Then she bought a little home and had it moved up by her mother's place and that is where I came home to. We lived there for seven and a half years and done a lot of work to that little place. They decided they were going to build the freeway so they moved everyone out and we moved the home down here to where I live now⁴. At first there were just two rooms and an upstairs. The bedrooms were upstairs. Under the stairs used to be Gladys washing room. We eventually added on; two or three times since then.

When I got out of the service they had what they call 52 – 20. You could get \$20.00 a week for 52 weeks so I collected that. We had one child when I was in the military; Earlene, and after I got home Gladys had a miscarriage. They had given all the men that served in the South Pacific Atabrine tablets to fight malaria and it would weaken the sperm of the men; so there were a lot of miscarriages from the guys that came home at that time. We were lucky, she only had one miscarriage. We had another girl; Susan and then two boys: Edwin and Jeff.

⁴ 645 West State Street

Geneva was operating when I got out of the service and a lot of the guys were trying to get on there at that time. On the 23rd of August 1946 I got on at the coke plant at Geneva. At that time when you were assigned a certain place you couldn't transfer. In the coke plant there were four batteries of ovens and 63 ovens per battery. Fifteen tons of coal went into those ovens and then they would cook for about 17 hours or something like that. On the east side of the batteries they had a big ol' pusher or ram that would push that coke out into a car; then they would quench it for about two minutes; then dump it on the wharf and send that coke over to the blast furnace and they would use it there.

I worked in the coke plant for 37 years and 8 months. I retired April 30th 1983. I was only 61 and so Geneva paid \$400.00 a month until I was old enough to retire on my birthday at age 62. They eventually closed the coke plant down. It used to be the best producing plant in the United States.

My wife passed away February 27, 2007 and I had her buried in the Lehi Cemetery. It has been hard to be alone. When I was in the military they had what they called V-mail⁵. Any writing we wanted to send back home would go on that v-mail. If they wanted to look in there, they did; they censored it. My mail never got censored much because I knew what I could write and what I couldn't. But you know - my dear sweet wife - all the time I was in the service; she wrote me every day, every single day (as he says with a tear in his eye). I'd get my mail probably once every three weeks so I'd get a lot of letters. I couldn't write to her every day (he laughs), I could only write once a week or once every ten days. There was another Earl Thomas in American Fork and our mail use to get mixed up. When I found that out I started using my initial - Earl L Thomas - to keep things on the straight and narrow.

My wife was always sending pictures; big pictures of Earlene. She always kept me informed about how Earlene was growing up. When I got home Earlene didn't want anything to do with me. She was three and she thought I wasn't her dad. She was set in her ways but it worked out eventually and we became compatible after a while. Anyway, I sure miss Gladys.

⁵ Victory mail or V-mail for short; a letter would be censored, copied to film, and printed back to paper upon arrival at its destination.