Lt-Col. S.W. Thomson

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Extracted from Matthew K. Barrett's excellent webpage at https://matthewkbarrett.com/

Lieutenant-Colonel Syd Thomson
Seaforth Highlanders of Canada
Royal Highlanders (The Black Watch)



I went to investigate and naturally, but stupidly, drew my revolver as I approached the vehicle with a couple of chaps. The stupid part being that the revolver marked me as an officer. Several shots were fired from the side of the road and I got one on the inside fleshy part of my right thigh which just missed providing me with the voice of a tenor. Fortunately the bullet went clear through … I could not drop my shorts for an examination, however by putting a hand up one leg I was reasonably satisfied that I was not to become a eunuch.
(S.W. Thomson, "Wounded in Sicily," 109)

Born in Salmon Arm, British Columbia on 14 November 1914, **Sydney Wilford Thomson** was son of the town mayor and worked odd jobs during the Great Depression. Having joined the Rocky Mountain Rangers in the 1930s, he mobilized with the outbreak of war and went overseas with the Seaforth Highlanders as a lieutenant. He landed in Sicily as a company commander on 10 July 1943.

A few days after making landfall, Thomson suffered a gunshot wound to the leg and was evacuated to North Africa. He later wrote: "I can just remember a cute young British nurse taking a pair of scissors to cut off my very dusty and bloody shorts and saying 'don't worry Canada' before giving me a shot in the rear."

In hospital he became one of the first "Guinea pigs" for Alexander Fleming's penicillin. Although the treatment worked, Thomson soon tired of hospital life and determined to rejoin the Seaforths. He claimed to have simply boarded a ship destined for Sicily. By the time he was reported absent without leave months later, not only was he busy fighting in Italy but he had become battalion commander: "I had much pleasure in answering this letter, and stating that Thomson was forgiven and was now commanding the Battalion, signed "S.W. Thomson, Lt. Col."

By October, he had become acting major and earned the Military Cross for leading an assault up a ridge under heavy enemy fire. When Lieutenant-Colonel **J.D. Forin** was wounded by German artillery on 10 December 1943,

Thomson assumed command of the battalion just prior to the Battle of Ortona. For his steadfast leadership in the house-to-house fighting, he earned the Distinguished Service Order. The recommendation read in part:

Although constantly exposed to sniping and to machine gun, mortar and shell fire, he remained with the most forward elements of his battalion personally directing and co-ordinating the defence, consolidating gains and encouraging his men in this critical and bitter struggle.

It was not only Major Thomson's tactical skill and fighting spirit but also the inspiring example set by his cheerfulness under heavy fire and cool disdain of danger that ensured it failure.

Thomson had learned the critical importance of conspicuous courage from his mentor, former Seathforth CO and current superior, Brigadier **Bert Hoffemister** of the 2nd Infantry Brigade. In an interview with historian Doug Delaney, Thomson stressed:

During a sticky battle, morale is as important, if not more important than good tactics. On the scale of 1 to 10, morale will go from 4 to 9 just by the appearance of a senior commander in the line when and where the bullets are flying. Bert understood this.

At the end of December 1943, Thomson relinquished command to newly arrived Lieutenant-Colonel **A.J. Creighton** to take a senior officer's course in England. He resumed command in May 1944, leading the regiment through the Hitler Line to the Gothic Line. Physically and mentally tired, he was posted to England in October, and promoted to colonel in charge of a training brigade. Following this period of rest, he reverted in rank in April 1945 to take over the Royal Highlanders of Canada (The Black Watch) in the Netherlands. He became acting commander of the 5th Infantry Brigade just before VE-Day.

Retiring from the army in 1946, he partnered with Lt-Col. **Jim Stone** of the Edmonton Regiment to build a tourist resort Sandy Point at Salmon Arm. However, both soon bored of the business and sought new adventures. Stone went on to command the PPCLI in the Korean War and Thomson joined the United Nations Military Observers Group on the Indian-Pakistan border region in the 1950s. Of these early peacekeeping duties, he later recalled, "Usually we'd drive up in our jeep and the soldiers would say, 'Oh the U.N.'s here' and stop shooting—at least until we left."

Thomson died in Salmon Arm on 8 November 2008 at the age of 93.