



Heroes of the Medal of Honor

CHARLES L. THOMAS

Fighting a desperate battle against strong German positions at the French town of Climbach in December 1944, Charles L. Thomas led his troops of the 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion with valour

WORDS MIKE HASKEW

The objective was the town of Climbach, France, usually a quiet, picturesque locale in the northern Vosges mountains. On 14 December 1944, however, the prospect of entering Climbach was anything but appealing.

World War II was in its fifth year, and the American Seventh Army had battled its way eastward, sluggishly at times, as the conflict reached the German frontier and the enemy fought tenaciously in defence of their homeland. The cold wind swept across the forested and mountainous landscape as the troops of Task Force Blackshear drew up to their staging area, preparing for an assault to capture Climbach, where a defending concentration of tanks, guns and infantry of the battle-hardened 21st Panzer Division was expected to put up a ferocious fight.

Lieutenant Colonel John Blackshear had been assigned the task of taking Climbach, and his assembled strength included a platoon of M4 Sherman medium tanks from the 14th Armored Division, a company of the 411th Regiment, 103rd Infantry Division, a heavy weapons platoon that brought firepower with mortars and machine guns, and the Third Platoon, Company C, 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion (towed).

As 24-year-old Lieutenant Charles L. Thomas mounted an M20 scout utility vehicle to lead the initial probe towards Climbach, he was under no illusions that a difficult engagement was ahead. Commanding the men of Company C and their four 76.2mm (three-inch) anti-tank guns, his M20 was in the vanguard of the advance.

By December 1944 the soldiers of the 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion were no strangers to the battlefield. They had come ashore in France in October and engaged in combat for the first time during attempts by General George S. Patton Jr.'s Third Army to capture the fortress city of Metz. On 5 December the unit had been reassigned to the Seventh Army's 103rd Infantry Division.

Still, another kind of adversity was ever looming, sometimes in the shadows of the business at hand, sometimes blatant and terribly offensive, but always there. The United States remained a segregated nation, and

in the American South the era of Jim Crow dominated nearly every aspect of everyday living. The US Army was a mirror of society, and the all-black 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion was a segregated unit.

While its other ranks were African-American, the majority of its officers were white. Black soldiers during World War II were often relegated to menial tasks – cooking, doing laundry, construction, loading and unloading. Although a few African-American units had been trained for combat, they had to overcome prejudice in the upper echelons of the army command structure. Often, white officers simply did not want black troops under their command in the field. The situation was difficult to say the least, and the American military was not desegregated until President Harry S. Truman finally ordered an end to discrimination in 1948.

Lieutenant Thomas and the Third Platoon moved out. Heading westward towards Climbach, the Americans rounded a curve along the road over La Schleife hill and crested the high ground about 275 metres (300 yards) from the town. Immediately they came under terrific fire from 88mm multi-purpose artillery and German tanks, while at least a company of panzergrenadiers steadily fired machine guns, rifles and shoulder-borne anti-tank weapons. The enemy force was dug in along high ground from 400-490 metres (1,300-1,600 feet) above and about 640 metres (700 yards) distant. A brisk exchange of small arms accompanied the crash of German mortars and heavy guns. One



His right arm in a sling, Captain Charles L. Thomas receives the Distinguished Service Cross from Brigadier General Joseph E. Bastion

*An officer of the
614th Tank Destroyer
Battalion, Charles L.
Thomas discharged his
duties under fire while
seriously wounded*

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President Bill Clinton awarding Medals of Honor in 1997

American recalled that the first indication of the presence of the enemy was the blast of several high-explosive rounds from camouflaged German positions.

An enemy shell scored a direct hit on Thomas’s M20 and he was seriously wounded. Ignoring his own injuries, the lieutenant maintained the presence of mind to halt the trailing column and then assist in pulling other wounded crewmen to relative safety. In the process, Thomas was exposed to heavy enemy fire and sustained further wounds to his legs, arms and chest. He ordered his anti-tank guns to deploy and begin returning fire, and the soldiers obeyed, setting up in an open field that provided virtually no cover from the punishing German fire, but was the only nearby location where their guns could unlimber. He handed over command to a subordinate officer only after he was sure that the situation was under control.

Two of the 614th’s guns were knocked out within minutes, and a third was silenced later, but the fourth continued to hit back at the enemy, providing a base of covering fire as the accompanying infantry and tanks executed a flanking movement in an attempt to dislodge the defenders. The gun crews lost eight of ten men, and the Third Platoon remained engaged for four hours. The 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion lost 50 per cent of its strength killed and wounded. The heroism of the 614th, as its men stood to their guns, allowed the flanking movement to succeed with the support of a rolling artillery barrage, and the town was in American hands later in the day.

The 103rd Division after-action report described the sacrifice of Lieutenant Thomas and the men under his command at Climbach as an “outstanding performance of mass heroism on the part of the officers and men of Company C, 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion, [which] precluded a near catastrophic reverse for the task force.” Lieutenant Colonel Blackshear recommended Thomas for the Distinguished Service Cross, and the 614th received a Distinguished Unit Citation – the first for the 103rd Division and the first for an African-American unit in World War II. For individual actions on that memorable day, four other soldiers of the 614th earned the Silver Star – two of them posthumously – and nine received the Bronze Star.

Thomas was evacuated to a field hospital, then to a hospital in Britain, and subsequently returned to the United States, where he underwent physical rehabilitation and convalescence in Michigan, close to his family home in Detroit. Accounts of his heroism splashed across the local newspapers, but Thomas shunned the celebrity status that

was being thrust upon him. When asked about the events at Climbach, he responded, “I know I was sent out to locate and draw the enemy fire, but I didn’t mean to draw that much.”

In March 1945 Brigadier General Joseph E. Bastion, commander of Percy Jones General Hospital in Battle Creek, Michigan, presented the Distinguished Service Cross to Thomas, who was also promoted to captain. He was only the second black soldier to receive the Distinguished Service Cross, and a sizable crowd gathered for the event, including leaders of the black community in Detroit and local government officials. At the time of the ceremony, Thomas was still recovering from severe wounds. Three fingers on his right hand were unable to bend, he lost a portion of his right arm, and he recalled that his stomach looked like a roadmap, as it was criss-crossed with the scars from many stitches.

An article that appeared in *Yank* magazine on 23 February 1945 praised the 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion’s action at Climbach. Lieutenant Colonel Frank Pritchard, who had succeeded Blackshear as its commanding officer, commented, “If you only knew how... proud I am of my boys.” Pritchard was one of six white officers in the battalion at the time; the others were black. “They’re all proud of the 614th, from the division CG [commanding general] down,” The *Yank* reporter continued. “The division CG is supposed to have said he’d fight like hell if anyone tried to take the 614th TD away from him.”

Meanwhile, the 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion served through to the end of World War II in Europe. Elements participated in the seizure of the Brenner Pass in Austria during the last week of the conflict and linked up with the 88th Infantry Division advancing from Italy. The soldiers of the 614th received eight Silver Stars, 28 Bronze Stars and 79 Purple Hearts during their service in combat.

Thomas was unable to return to his unit before the end of the war but remained in the army until 1947, retiring with the rank of major. Although many observers believed that his actions at Climbach merited the Medal of Honor, the racism that pervaded the US military during the 1940s precluded

Charles L. Thomas rode in an M20 armoured utility car similar to this vehicle during the engagement on 14 December 1944



Below: The mountainous northern Vosges near Climbach, France, presented difficult terrain during the advance of American forces in the winter of 1944



Left: The 76.2mm (three-inch) towed anti-tank gun was the primary weapon of the 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion during World War II





him from receiving the country's highest award for bravery in battle. Circumstances were to remain unchanged for another 50 years, and Thomas's valour, like that of numerous other black soldiers, faded into obscurity.

After his discharge from the army, Thomas talked little about his wartime experiences. He married in 1949, worked as a missile technician at Selfridge Field, an airbase in Mount Clemens, Michigan, and as a computer programmer for the Internal Revenue Service. He tinkered with automobiles while also building television sets in the basement of his home. Although he rarely mentioned his military service, his son recalled occasional visits with soldiers that Thomas had known during World War II. Many of them were shocked to see him alive, believing that he had died in a hail of German gunfire at Climbach. "People who saw him thought they saw a ghost," said his son. A nephew was surprised to learn of his uncle's heroism and commented, "When I found out he was a hero, I tried to get him to talk about it, but he wouldn't."

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**"ONLY AFTER HE WAS CERTAIN
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HIMSELF TO BE EVACUATED"**

Medal of Honor citation

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Thomas died of cancer in 1980 at the age of 59. From there, his story might have ended, despite his exceptional service, as one of 1.2 million black Americans who wore their nation's uniform during World War II. However, half a century after the end of the war the exploits of the young lieutenant at Climbach and those of other black heroes of the conflict came to light once again. In 1995 the research of a select

team of historians and US Army personnel surrounding the heroism of these men was published after a three-year assessment. The conclusion was clear: seven black soldiers had been denied the Medal of Honor simply because of their race.

Subsequently, President Bill Clinton presented the Medal of Honor to these deserving heroes. One of them, 77-year-old Vernon Baker, was still alive to receive his long-overdue recognition at the White House on 13 January 1997. The president remarked that each recipient had acted selflessly "at the risk of his life, above and beyond the call of duty. In the greatest struggle in human history, they helped lead the forces of freedom to victory."

For Charles Thomas and his family, the long road to well-deserved recognition had become a microcosm of the societal changes slowly taking effect in the USA. The black soldiers who gave their lives, were grievously wounded, or otherwise served with distinction in WWII demonstrated that, in the midst of battle with lives on the line, the relevance of race was diminished.