

# William E. “Bill” Thomas

by Martin J. Pociask

PHOTO BY DAVID OSBORNE, HAI



Director of HAI Communications and Editor, Martin J. Pociask,  
interviewing William E. Thomas, June 14, 2007



PHOTO EXCERPTED FROM THE RUDDER

Young William Thomas as  
pictured in *The Rudder*

The Brigadier General  
Clinton W. Russell (5th ARUF)

Historical Interview by Martin J. Pociask with William E. Thomas on his Experiences While Stationed as a Staff Sergeant in Charge of the Woodworking Department on an Aircraft Repair Unit (Floating)(ARUF) Operating in the Pacific, including the Philippines, During World War II. The 5th ARUF Was One of Two ARUFs Involved in one of the First Medical Helicopter Evacuations in History.

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# HAI Heritage Series

**T**he following interview was conducted with William Thomas on June 14, 2007, in his home in Saratoga, California. The background to this interview is the story of 70 U.S. soldiers who were medically evacuated by helicopter during battles in the Philippines. The participating helicopters were stationed on two floating aircraft repair depots called Aircraft Repair Units (Floating) (ARUF). There were 12 helicopters on six ships spread out over the Pacific theater. The ships were converted Liberty ships, manned by Merchant Marines, defended by Navy gunners, and under the

auspices of the U.S. Army Transportation Corp. The administrative and operational heart of the organization was the U.S. Army Air Force. Helicopters from the 5th and 6th ARUF Units performed all of the 70 Philippine medical rescues. There were two helicopters stationed on each ship.

This interview with William Thomas centers on his recollection of those rescues, and of his shipboard friend and helicopter pilot, William Cowgill, who was responsible for rescuing 17 of the wounded and their evacuation for medical treatment.

**ROTOR:** Bill, please tell us when and where you were born, and where you grew up.

**Thomas:** I was born February 14, 1919 in Union, Oregon. We moved to Pacific Grove, California when I was one year old.

**ROTOR:** Bill, can you tell us about your education, where you attended college, and what your major was?

**Thomas:** Sure. I grew up in Monterrey Peninsula, Pacific Grove. (John

Steinbeck's vacation place was just on the other side of the park from our place. I had a varied education. First I thought I was going to be a forest ranger, so I took classes at a junior college. Then I learned about Santa Barbara University and had a change of heart. I like to do woodwork and so forth, so I went to college at Santa Barbara, and majored in Industrial Arts. I also worked before the war as a machinist. After graduating from Santa Barbara, I took a class at Stanford in school planning. I also took extension courses from the

University of California, Santa Cruz. I got my administrative credential from San José State, which is now San José University, and also took some classes in history. I ended up with a Life Diploma in General Elementary, a Life Diploma in Special Secondary Industrial Arts up through college, and an administrative credential that I didn't use. After World War II, I taught architectural drawing at the Seabee Base below Santa Barbara. From 1950 to 1955 I moved to Marina, California and taught elementary school. Three of those five years I

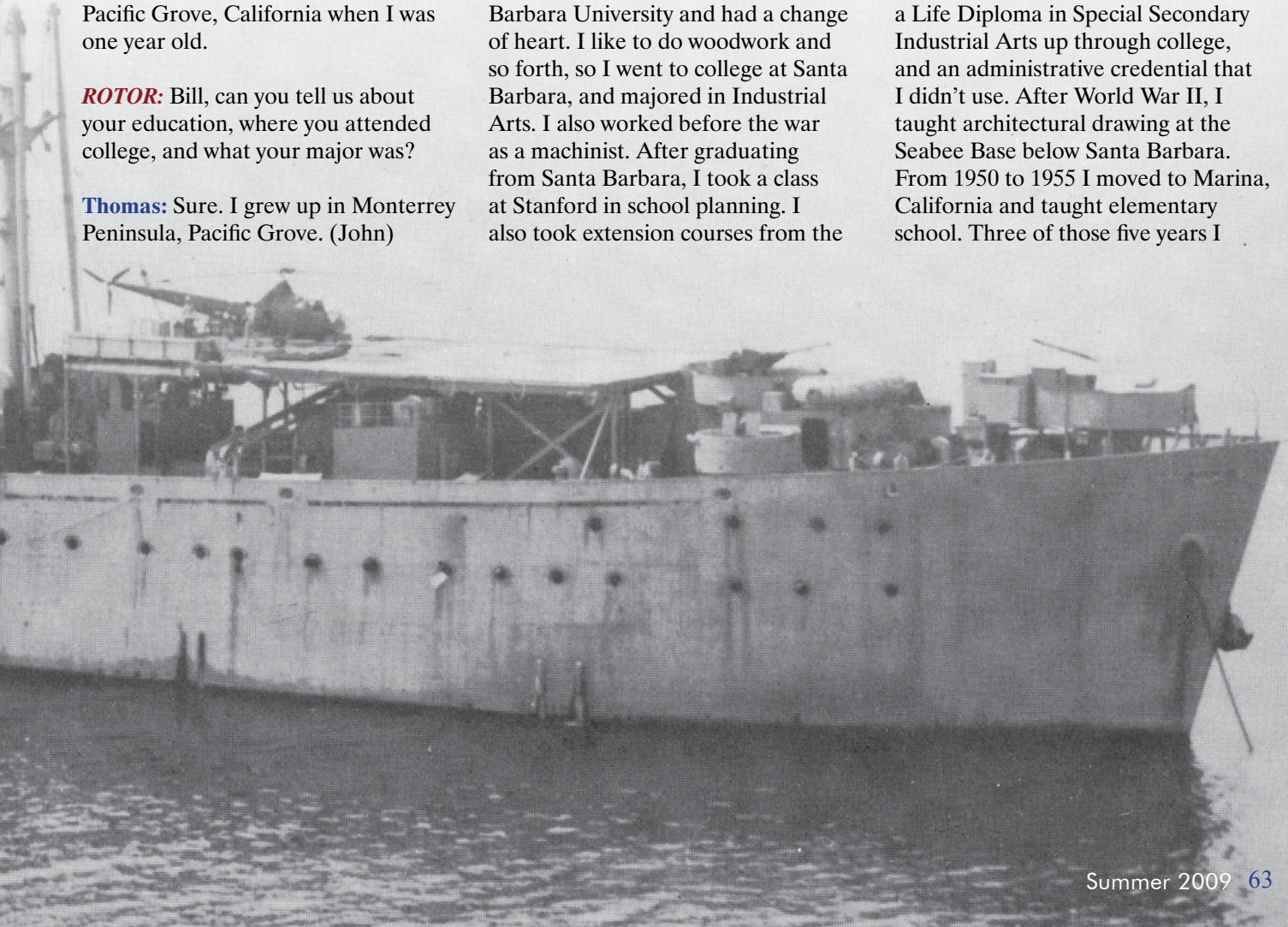




PHOTO EXCERPTED FROM THE RUDDER

Sikorsky R-4B helicopter lifting off the deck of the Brigadier General Clinton W. Russell as pictured in *The Rudder*

taught architectural, mechanical, and engineering drawing at Monterey Peninsula College. So that was pretty much my background as far as education is concerned.

**ROTOR:** You joined the U.S. Army Air Force in 1942, and you were assigned to Yuma, Arizona, as an airplane woodworker. Can you tell us about this?

**Thomas:** I enlisted in the Air Force as a machinist and my wife, Martha, and I were married in July 6, 1941, before the war, so we have been married 68 years. I was unassigned, and as I had a service station in Santa Barbara, we went to Blythe and I pumped gas there. From there I went to Yuma. While I was at Yuma, I saw this civilian fellow who had served in World War I, and some civilian girls, who were going around with a little box, repairing airplanes — wooden and fabric airplanes and twin-engine trainers. Because I had majored in industrial arts and woodworking, I created my own position, and became the only soldier on the field to do it.

**ROTOR:** You had a brief flying career.

**Thomas:** I had taken my Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) certification course in college before the war. I passed my flight test for private and limited commercial licenses. That was the first time I ever flew. I had never been in an airplane in my life. I got in the airplane and the

instructor forgot to put chocks in front of the wheels. He went out and started the propeller, and it revved up. I sat there not knowing what was going on and the plane started to take off. He grabbed the wing and it pivoted into another plane, and I'll never forget seeing that wooden propeller go right down to the hub at the same time the wing of this other plane was ripped up. So that was my first experience in flying! But they didn't hold it against me because it wasn't my fault. On my first cross-country solo flight, I flew from Santa Barbara to Oxnard and back, passing my cross-country requirements for private and limited commercial license. The second time I flew was as an airplane woodworker. I repaired an airplane out in the desert and then flew with the pilot and observed the spot I'd repaired, to make sure it worked fine.

**ROTOR:** Tell us about your invention.

**Thomas:** While working as an airplane woodworker at Yuma, Martha and I went to our home in Santa Barbara on leave. While we were away, my base changed over to a gunnery school where they taught gunnery for the waist-gun position of a B-17. They needed somebody there to develop a lead computing camera gun for the B-17 waist gun position. I made the whole thing and tested it. So the third flight that I made in a plane was in the B-17 during an AT-6 simulated attack to test the lead computing camera gun. Fortunately I was my own boss and

had the run of the base. I could go into the wood shop, the metal shop, and the drafting shop and tell them what to do to start manufacturing. The fourth time I flew was to Manila in a helicopter piloted by Robert Cowgill from a Liberty ship anchored in Manila Harbor.

**ROTOR:** You experienced another assignment change.

**Thomas:** About that time, General Hap Arnold had organized outfits that were floating air depots, or Aircraft Repair Unit Floating (ARUF). The commander of the base wanted to keep me there because of my work on this lead computing camera gun, but in the end I could not stay because I was assigned to go with one of the aircraft repair units.

**ROTOR:** You mentioned that General Hap Arnold was behind the ARUF project. The ARUF had highly qualified repairmen stationed on six ARUFs that would island-hop to support the aircraft. Can you tell us more about that?

**Thomas:** It was the 5th Aircraft Repair Unit Floating (ARUF); we called it 'The Ivory Soap Unit.'

**ROTOR:** Can you tell us why it was called The Ivory Soap Unit?

**Thomas:** Because Ivory Soap advertised that it was 99.99 percent pure, and it floats. So that was the code name for our repair outfits.

**ROTOR:** When did helicopters join the unit, and what was that like for you?

**Thomas:** The helicopters joined the unit at Point Clear, Mobile, Alabama. It was the first time that any of the men had seen a helicopter. At Point Clear these Army Air Corps soldiers were trained for sea duty and became sailors. Because we were both soldiers and sailors, we were called "Sailjers." I was put in charge of the woodworking shop, and ultimately promoted to Staff Sergeant. I wasn't surprised at all to see helicopters because I knew they had tested things at the Macon Akron

Hangar at Moffitt. My dad, as a boy in Kansas, built gliders and flew in them. Having flown myself, it didn't seem that strange to have them around.

**ROTOR:** From Mobile, Alabama, where did your unit travel?

**Thomas:** After leaving Mobile we visited Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, and then we went through the Panama Canal. By the way, I still have a Panamanian dollar that I got from one of the workers at the Canal. I set it into plastic and made a letter opener out of it. Then we went unescorted across the Pacific, across the dateline, and across the equator. We first landed in Manus, then Biak Island, then on to Leyte. Then we sailed on to Subic Bay in the Philippines, supporting airplanes on Clark Field, then on to Manila Bay. After three months in Manila we continued on to Okinawa, and then we returned to Manila after the war had ended.

**ROTOR:** The ship you were on was designed to be an aircraft repair facility.

**Thomas:** The idea of our outfit, as Hap Arnold developed it, was that we were a complete air depot on a ship. When islands were captured,

we would supply everything needed until we were able to establish a base on the islands. If they needed something in a hurry they used the helicopter, and they could take parts or even specialists to the base and repair the planes. As soon as they set up the facilities, we moved on. We island hopped through the Dutch East Indies, Leyte, and Luzon. At Luzon we saw the first action where enemy forces were bombing off to the north.

**ROTOR:** After spending so much time on a ship, did you have an opportunity to explore?

**Thomas:** We had a shore station at Manila. I was able to get off at Manila and even to the north of Manila at one of the cities, San Fernando. There I was able to hitch a ride on a truck loaded with bombs, and I rode with the bombs to San Fernando. I met a young boy there who impressed me because he spoke many different languages. He spoke Tagalog, the native language of the Philippines; he spoke Spanish because the Spanish had ruled the Philippines at one time; he spoke Japanese because he was there during the Japanese occupation; and he spoke English. It amazed me to see somebody so young with that ability.

**ROTOR:** Tell us about Biak, one of your stops on the way to the Philippines.

**Thomas:** Biak, as I understand it, was pretty much of a secret because they didn't want anyone to know that we had a facility there. It was as much a secret as was our Ivory Soap outfit. One of the fellows wrote that we had intelligence people who controlled the letters. This fellow wrote to his girlfriend or his wife, and he said, "I can't tell you where we are, honey, but oh my aching Biak, it's hot out here!" Of course that didn't get through.

**ROTOR:** There was also a shore station at Okinawa, where you were able to explore Naha.

**Thomas:** Yes, we had a shore station at Okinawa, where I was able to go and explore Naha. They let me go ashore when I wanted to, especially after the war ended. At Naha I took pictures. Naha was pretty devastated. At Naha the locals had what they called 'womb tombs,' which are burial sites where they held the ashes of their ancestors. They had steps inside; in the lower level were the most recent ancestors, and in the upper level they had the ancient or the oldest ancestors. I'll never forget. Outside they kept a Singer sewing machine! Going in there was kind of dangerous. The area was booby-trapped, but we took the chance. I once climbed up a church at Naha; I was up in the belfry and I was surprised to see signed in the top of the belfry, "Kilroy was here." Kilroy was a name for the United States Army source. I like to explore. In the Philippines I even ended up sleeping at Bilibid Prison. They let me sleep there overnight when there were Japanese prisoners there. Sleeping at the prison was nice because we had mosquito netting.

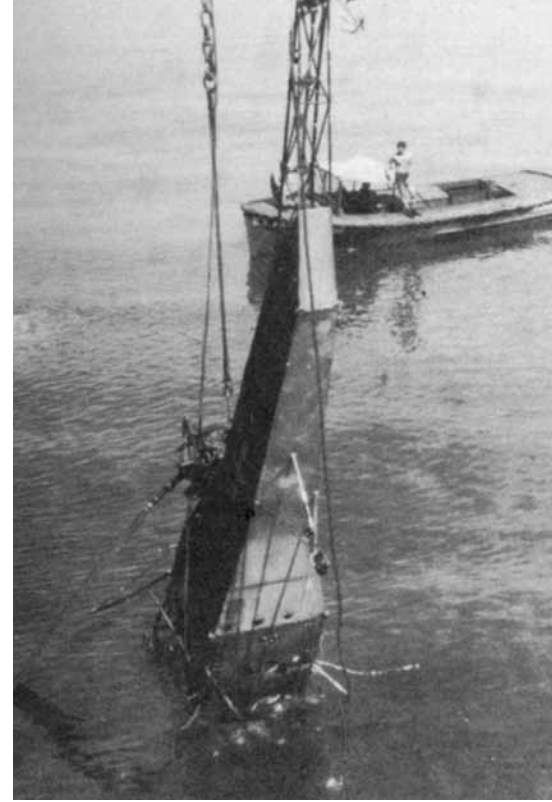
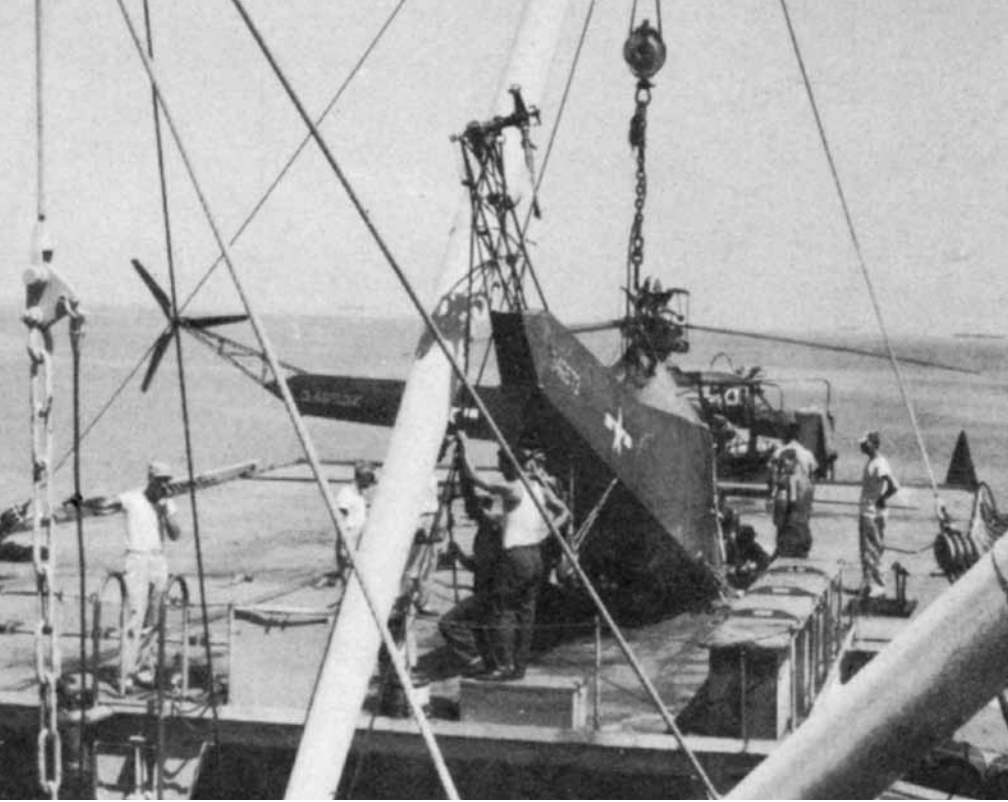
**ROTOR:** Tell us about Robert Cowgill.

**Thomas:** Bob Cowgill was one of the first military helicopter pilots, and the second aviator to rescue military casualties during combat in the Philippines. He was raised in Washington State, I believe, and his

Evacuating one of the 70 wounded servicemen

PHOTO COURTESY OF LOUIS CARLE





Lt. Cowgill's helicopter, "Little Brown Jug," being pulled from Manila Bay and placed on deck by the ship's booms.

PHOTOS EXCERPTED FROM *THE RUDDER*

father was also a pilot during World War I. He was designated as a test pilot and he tested single engine A-24 and A-25 dive-bombers until his training as a helicopter pilot.

**ROTOR:** Tell me about your flight over Manila.

**Thomas:** Flying in a helicopter was most interesting, especially the fact that we could fly over Manila and surrounding communities and see the people from up above. It was interesting to see the buildings that were on stilts and the Filipinos who lived in the upper part with their animals below. It was fascinating how versatile the helicopter was. With the pontoons they could land on either land or water, which they did. Bob did test flights in the helicopter as we traveled across the Pacific and the Equator and so forth. We have pictures in the book that we made of our outfit, like a college yearbook. One time, I can remember, the tailrotor hit a cable. Without that stabilizer, the whole fuselage went around at a slower speed than the upper rotor and they went into the water. Bob and his passenger both got out all right, and later they rigged a boom and fished the helicopter out of the ocean.

**ROTOR:** Cowgill had a pet name for his helicopter. Do you remember what that was?

**Thomas:** Yes, he called it Little Brown Jug.

**ROTOR:** Before the war ended, helicopters had become the latest thing. They were in demand as aircraft for the military, and eventually more than 300 helicopters had been delivered.

**Thomas:** Bob explained how he was called to get wounded out of the jungle and off of the mountains behind Manila where we were located, and how rocky it was and the problems he had. As I understand, there was enemy fire along the way as he flew back through the hill country. He explained how he lost a helicopter and a friend, who was helping take wounded out, and the hard time he had when his helicopter was damaged, and how he had to walk out and then walk back with parts to rebuild it.

**ROTOR:** That really was something.

**Thomas:** He also ran into some captured enemy while hiking the four miles or so out of the jungle.

**ROTOR:** Cowgill learned there had been a number of soldiers that needed to be rescued near Antipolo, Rizal Province, in Luzon, Philippines Islands.

**Thomas:** I believe so. Cowgill and the helicopter were only supposed to be a small part of the operation, but they ended up taking on a much bigger role in the war and in rescues. Army commanders thought that helicopters were the best way to get their troops out.

What is astounding is how much they play up helicopter rescues in the movies and on television, and how so few people knew about the ARUF helicopter rescues.

**ROTOR:** Yes, most people think of helicopter rescues as starting sometime around the Korean War, as in the MASH movies. This is very different; this started much, much earlier. Cowgill was a 21 year old pilot who piloted the first helicopter to land at Nichols Field in Manila. You mentioned earlier your ship's yearbook, which is titled *The Rudder*.

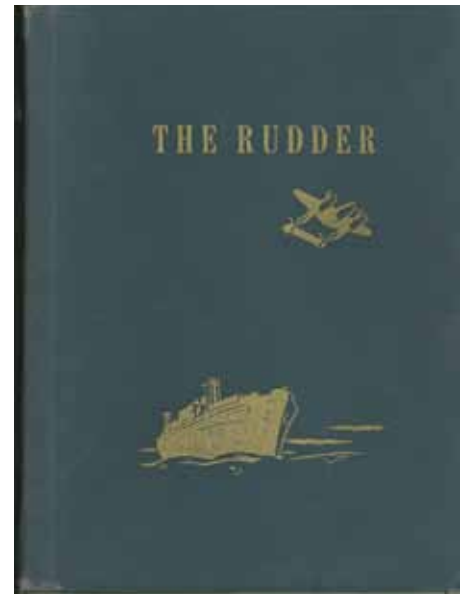
**Thomas:** *The Rudder* is like a college yearbook. It documents our travels

and involvement. It contains pictures of places we traveled to, our ship, and in several photographs you can see the helicopter up on the flight deck. It even contains a picture of when they pulled the helicopter out of the water after it went down. Even the fellow is in the water. The purpose of the book was to show our route from Mobile and on through to Leyte. In *The Rudder*, we have a complete report of our ship and the outfit. We have pictures of all the people, including a picture of the staff and myself working on the layout. Historians and many other people also worked on it. The book contains an early photograph of a class of Seabees that I taught; I was the only civilian in the picture, all the rest were Navy personnel. I taught architectural drawing at the time.

**ROTOR:** What kind of training did you receive?

**Thomas:** We trained while at Point Clear, Alabama, and it was complete Marine training. We learned all about ships, how to tie knots. Years later I found a magazine that listed the finest resorts in the United States and Point Clear, Alabama, was one of them. By the way, I did make use of the experience that I got in using plastic. At one of the islands they needed a top dome for a fighter plane that was

broken. I made a form and put cloth over it, with plaster of Paris and then cloth over that. Then I heated up a big sheet of plastic, we had big 4'x8' sheets of plastic in different thicknesses, and had a whole bunch of people with pliers go over it to help form it into the shape of a dome. Evidently it worked all right, because it was sent in and used. There is another item I might mention that was dear to my heart. We had a work order come through to our ship, the 5th Aircraft Repair Unit, from General Doolittle. He didn't have a good sign for his desk, so they asked me to make it. I just scrolled out General Doolittle in long hand; I made the letters with aluminum and used a mahogany base. I had the first V-8 of Ford V-8 and the instrument dial where they took in a drill press dowel and with abrasive you could make swirls. So over General Doolittle's sign, I swirled the aluminum throughout and made that. Pretty soon after it was sent back, the radiomen got information from General Doolittle wanting to know who had made the sign for him, and I guess they reported it. General Doolittle wrote me a letter thanking me for it and wishing me the best. As previously mentioned, Cowgill's father was a pilot in World War I, and of course General Doolittle was a World War I pilot also.



Cover of the ship's yearbook *The Rudder*.

**ROTOR:** That's right.

**Thomas:** He had a fantastic life. Years later I phoned General Doolittle's son in Carmel when I was there with a group from our plant society. At the time General Doolittle was pretty old and not capable of coming to the phone, but I did have a nice conversation with his son.

**ROTOR:** You're a man of many talents, and have built many interesting things. One of the things that you constructed was a radio. Do you want to talk about that?

**Thomas:** Yes. Aboard ship the radar and radiomen gave me some parts and showed me how to make the windings for a radio. I was able to listen to Tokyo Rose.

**ROTOR:** The first production helicopters were difficult to fly. In addition to the weight of the pilot and fuel, the aircraft could carry only about 200 extra pounds.

**Thomas:** They could only hold a certain weight on those helicopters. They had two seats. On our ship's helicopters they took out the passenger seat in order to fly the wounded out.

**ROTOR:** There were no radios in the helicopters back then. Do you remember how they would alert the

The layout and art staff of *The Rudder*. William Thomas is second from left.



PHOTO EXCERPTED FROM THE RUDDER

helicopter if there was a wounded victim?

**Thomas:** The people out in the field had radios, with which they could contact headquarters or the ship. They in turn could give the order and pass on the information.

**ROTOR:** Now, you later interviewed Cowgill after he had concluded his career with Hiller. In the interview he told you that after his Philippine helicopter flights he flew airplanes and worked at the 4th Air Depot Group, where he was promoted to commander of the Group. Do you remember anything about that?

**Thomas:** Yes, after he retired from the Air Force he went to work for Hiller. I happened to mention Cowgill to a neighbor who worked with Cowgill at Hiller Helicopter Corporation in Menlo Park, California. Cowgill did a lot of scientific work with Hiller, and with other people who developed the Hiller helicopter. Then he went back to his first love of woodworking and art and moved up to the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State where he had a place out in the woods all by himself. There he created all kinds of Indian carvings and so forth, which were very interesting to see.

**ROTOR:** Cowgill got some additional training by Sikorsky at their factory. He was one of the Army's first graduates from helicopter school.

**Thomas:** We had quite a long visit when I was up at his home on Olympic Peninsula after he had retired. I took a picture of him out in his front yard. My wife was with me and we were able to get quite a history of his background



William Thomas and his wife Martha.

PHOTO BY DAVID OSBORNE, HAI



William E. Thomas

and experiences during the war. He'd been retired for quite a while, and he was doing his artwork, and he showed me various things, his carvings and the different work that he had done. They were mostly Indian type artifacts like miniature totems and things, because he was born in Washington and had a background and familiarity with various Indian objects. Of course, as an artist, he was very good at that. I understand some of his works were exhibited in local art galleries.

**ROTOR:** Any children?

**Thomas:** We have four children, a girl and three boys. Our daughter is the oldest and a sociology professor with a doctoral degree, who studied Constitutional Law at Stanford and International Law in Paris. She is an author and a Fulbright and Fulbright-Hays Scholar.

**ROTOR:** Bill, on behalf of HAI, I congratulate you. You've had a remarkable career, and a great story to tell. Thank you for taking time for sharing your experiences with us. Do you have any closing comments to share?

**Thomas:** Well, I was so glad to be able to go and interview Bob, and record his experiences, because he was a very modest person. Although he felt it should be known what he had done, he felt he was just doing his job. He was very efficient at what he did.

**ROTOR:** Absolutely. Well thank you very much. 🙏

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**Martin J. Pociask** is Director of Communications for HAI.

## Editor's Note:

The two Heritage interviews in this issue of *ROTOR* magazine are part of a series relating to events surrounding the medical evacuation by helicopter of 70 wounded soldiers, from active combat zones to hospitals and field hospitals for treatment. Additional interviews will be published in future issues of *ROTOR* magazine highlighting and documenting this remarkable early use of the helicopter for EMS transport. Without the helicopter, many of the injured would surely have died.

Special thanks to the interviewees for sharing their experiences with our readers and the general public, and also for helping to preserve this historical moment in helicopter history, before it is lost to the sands of time.

I also wish to acknowledge Fred M. Duncan, whose earlier investigative work helped to collect and preserve some of that history, and Roger Conner of the Smithsonian Institution for his assistance and generous access to that great institution's historical files. And finally, I want to thank former HAI Chairman, Steve Sullivan, who first told me about this story, which came to his attention by way of a chance encounter with his neighbor, William Thomas, who was aboard the 5th ARUF, and knew first-hand the amazing lifesaving contribution of the helicopter in World War II — seven years before MASH helicopters were used with regularity in Korea.

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