

Wounded in Sicily

12 July 1943

Colonel S.W. Thomson, DSO, MC, CD

I was commanding one of the two assault companies, "A." There was very little resistance to the landing and we quickly took up a defensive perimeter to facilitate the landing of the balance of the battalion. Two small points. The defense wire on the beach was so tightly strung that we were able to walk on it, up and over. My company in this defensive position was naturally hugging the ground. I heard a rifleman say, "my bolt is stuck," another said, "so is mine." It became evident that the extremely fine sand in the area was adhering to the slight film of oil on the rifle bolts and jamming them. We passed the word quickly, bolts were cleaned and weapons kept off the ground. We would have been in a sorry position had there been a proper defence.

By evening most of the battalion had landed and we proceeded inland in single file, in the dark. I was lead company. Some time after midnight the lead section halted and its commander reported to me that there was a vehicle parked sideways across the road up front. 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. It caused a burning sensation more than anything else. I was spun around and quickly hit the ditch. We were wearing shorts with two very small belt buckles

difficult enough at the best of times, but quite impossible for my shaking fingers. 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 an eunuch. In a remarkably short time the unit Medical Officer (MO), Captain W.K. MacDonald, who was killed just twenty four days later, came up the ditch and was able to confirm my manhood. The Bn. moved on and I was taken to a huge barn and placed in a manger. The MO had given me a raw egg to swallow, ugh, and to this day no doctor has told me why. My bed of hay was reasonably comfortable, I had my small pack for a pillow and a blanket. I had been given a shot of morphine and was soon asleep. In the morning I was awakened by two Sicilians who came into the barn carrying pitchforks. They spotted me and came over. The most frightening moment of my life. Picture the fear of pitchforks being jammed into your chest and stomach. As they looked down on me I thrust a hand under the blanket and raised the blanket enough to, I hoped, indicate that I had a revolver trained on them. When I got to know the people of Sicily better it seemed unlikely that they would have attacked me. However they backed off and went and forked some hay into a manger for two oxen. Some time later, it seemed like many hours, two of our Regimental Aid Post chaps came to get me with a donkey cart. Where the hell were they when I was dying of fright? They were to take me to a Field Dressing Station in the rear, but after wandering around over the most jarring cobble stone roads the boys decided they were lost. Now

what? OK lets see if we can find the Battalion. More cobble stone roads and pain before we finally did find the Battalion. The CO, Bert Hoffmeister, was hopping mad and laid me on his Jeep to take me to the coast where I was put on a hospital ship. 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.

I woke up in a tented British hospital in Sousse, Tunisia, North Africa. After a day or two I was shifted to another British tented hospital on the outskirts of Tunis. It was here that Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of Penicillin, with a Dr. Fleury, came out from the UK to further test penicillin. Two British officers and myself were the Guinea pigs. I had it in powder form through my wound. One had an injection while the other took his orally, I think. I was back in the line in five weeks.

I finally ended up in a Canadian tented hospital in Phillipville, Algeria. After a few weeks the cast was removed from my leg and I had walking out privileges. I was fed up with the hospital and took the records from the bottom of my bed and stuffed them down the long drop. Confiding only in Lord John Tweedsmuir, who was in the same ward and a former Seaforth, I caught a ride into Cork Forest. This was a Canadian reinforcement depot and I was fortunate to walk right on a ship leaving for Sicily without being spotted. I received a wonderful reception from Hoffie.

Several months later after I had become the Bn. commander I received a letter addressed to the Battalion CO advising that one Captain S. W. Thomson had gone AWL from the hospital. 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."

Colonel S.W. "Syd" Thomson joined the Rocky Mountain Rangers in the 1930s transferring to the Seaforth Highlanders at the outbreak of war. Wounded in Sicily, he returned to serve as Company Commander, Second-in-Command and Commanding Officer of the battalion. In October 1944 he was promoted to Acting Colonel and sent to England to command an infantry training unit at Aldershot.

In April 1945 he reverted to Lieutenant-Colonel to take command of the Black Watch. Colonel Thomson volunteered for the Pacific Force and remained in the Army until 1946. He rejoined the forces to serve with the United Nations Military Observers Group in Pakistan.