

LIVE & LEARN

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1920-1937: Farm Boy

1937-1959: Soldier, United States Army

Curriculum Vitae

The Life and Times of Bill Thornton

by Ben Greenberg

Like many, Bill Thornton limits the length of his resume to one page, a list of simple statements meant to quickly summarize his life's work. Yet, it's easy to see at first glance that this is no ordinary life. If the first two lines are not enough to pique your interest—1920-1937: Farm Boy; 1937-1959: Soldier, United States Army—then the last line surely will—Education: Excelsior College Bachelor of Science degree in Liberal Studies 2005.

A lifelong learner in the fullest sense of the term, this self-professed “subsistence farmer from the red dirt of North Carolina” during the Great Depression, who worked his way through the better part of the 20th Century, is still going strong as a recent college graduate in the 21st.

Of his time on the family farm in Alamance County, Bill said, “my grandfather was the supervisor, the manager, and the primary laborer; and I was his happy helper. Working alongside my grandfather, I know now, that I developed an aptitude for responsibility that has served me well throughout my life.”

In 1937, he enlisted in the United States Army at age 16. He lied about his age (quite common in those days) and convinced his mother to sign the papers. He was assigned to Madison Barracks, New York, near Watertown, for basic and advanced training, eventually joining the Army Medical Services Detachment. During this time, he attended night courses at Watertown High School and also made his first foray into distance learning by completing a correspondence course in business administration offered by the American Technical Society.

After training, Thornton went to Fort Benning, Georgia. In retrospect, he says that in 1940, it was clear that “we were preparing for a war of worldwide consequences.” The seeds of responsibility that his grandfather planted in him blossomed, when barely 19, he made sergeant. His senior NCOs (noncommissioned officer) began molding him into a competent leader. “Of lasting importance, they taught me that delegating authority was an essential element of leadership, but that responsibility could never be delegated,” he said.

After a series of maneuvers in the States as well as two promotions that brought him to the rank of staff sergeant, Thornton and his battalion were tabbed for overseas assignment. This was late November 1941; a few more weeks and the United States would officially enter the war. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, his battalion shipped out on assignment and spent the better part of two years in Iceland before moving on to England in December 1943. From that point on, their time was spent practicing invasion exercises. In April 1944, during one of these, known as Exercise Tiger, nine German E-boats attacked their convoy of landing ship, tanks (LSTs), sinking one and severely damaging another.

In early June, Thornton's battalion again boarded an LST for more exercises, or so they thought. When they heard the roar of hundreds of heavy aircraft passing overhead from west to east, they realized the invasion had begun. It was D-Day. On June 8th, Bill Thornton and his detachment made the final hundred yards push to Utah Beach. From that day until VE Day, they participated with distinction in five campaigns: Normandy,

Northern France, Rhineland, Ardennes (Battle of the Bulge), and Central Europe. Thornton was awarded the Bronze Star for superior leadership as well as five campaign stars and the bronze arrowhead for the invasion of Normandy.

es Army

After the war, Thornton did what a lot of enlisted men did; he left the armed services, but after two months, he decided to reenlist in the Army as a staff sergeant. “With experience only as a farm boy until age 16, and then more than eight years without experience in civilian employment, scant formal education, and millions of service men returning to civilian occupations, what were my real prospects?”

Stationed in Illinois through July 1946, he was promoted to technical sergeant and then master sergeant (at that time the highest enlisted grade). Thornton also took the opportunity to study and take examinations toward a high school diploma. In June, 1946, he graduated from the Waukegan Illinois Township High School. A month later, he was en route to Berlin Military Post (BMP), Germany, for assignment.

It was at this time that he met his future wife, Elga. She was an amateur figure skater when Thornton saw her perform in an ice show. “Well I thought she was the prettiest thing I had seen in my whole life and I wanted to get to know her,” recounted Thornton fondly. He composed a letter and had a friend who was fluent in German translate it. But the letter found its intended audience less than enthusiastic. “A couple of days later [after the ice show], I received a letter and he wanted to meet me; I wasn’t going to have anything to do with this whatsoever,” giggled Elga. “But my father said I could at least be polite.” Father must have known best because they married in 1949.

Things weren’t always easy for the couple. “We started out on a shoestring living hand to mouth,” said Bill. “Today youngsters have to have things immediately,” added Elga. “But it was a good experience,” she continued, as Bill laughed. “It was,” insisted Elga. “It builds character,” Bill conceded.

Returning to the States in 1949, the Thorntons were stationed in Fort Lee, Virginia, during which time Bill separated from the enlisted ranks and was appointed as a warrant officer. By the end of 1952, he once again found himself serving during war-time in Korea until May 1954. His duties required frequent travel by Jeep to and from four medical outposts along remote roads in central Korea, which he described as “gripping but uneventful.” For his service during a second war, he was awarded two more campaign stars.

After the war, the Thorntons spent time in Fort Carson, Colorado, and Munich, Germany, until Bill retired from the Army in 1959. Eventually, he joined the

ranks of the federal civil service. His work took him back to Fort Lee, Virginia, where he put his military experience to good use, forging a successful career in logistics as a military analyst.

During this time, Bill worked with military pilots who, as he described, “used a language of their own,” which reignited a long-forgotten desire to fly airplanes. So in 1965, at age 44, he joined the Fort Lee Flying Club. By 1967 he had his private pilot certificate and by 1969 his commercial license and instrument certification. He also took over accounting and publicity responsibilities for the club, even securing permission from Charles Schultz to use Snoopy piloting his doghouse as their mascot. The club’s membership and flight activities soared. “Though perhaps not the most important contribution I have made to the United States Army, this was one of my most gratifying experiences,” said Bill.

In 1979, he retired for the second time, after more than 40 years of federal service. For most, this would have been enough. But not content to just sit around, Thornton started a successful real estate business, which he ran until his next retirement in 1994.

So what’s a person to do after retiring for the third time at age 74? For Thornton the answer was easy—earn a college degree. “I felt I was beginning to vegetate and I needed something to challenge me,” said Bill. He also thought he might have missed something by not having higher education, and he has two grandchildren for whom he could set a good example. “No one reason was paramount, but they all came together at the right time,” he explained.

Bill enrolled in Excelsior in 1997, and by 2005, at age 84, had satisfied all the requirements for a Bachelor of Science degree with a major in history. At Commencement, when his name was called, the crowd roared. Bill flashed a smile and a thumbs-up, and the audience responded with a standing ovation. The profound respect and unmistakable admiration from the crowd that day was well deserved.

A two-time war veteran who declines to be called a hero, an accomplished businessman, and a college graduate, by any measure Bill Thornton has led a successful life. He has certainly earned the right to relax, with Elga, of course. But what’s next? Thinking aloud, he chuckled, “Well I don’t think I have any business trying to reach a graduate degree.” But you can tell he’s thinking about it. And with Bill Thornton you get the idea that anything is possible if he sets his mind to it. ■



2005: Bachelor of Science