

SCR 19 STAFF MEASURE SUMMARY

Senate Committee On Veterans and Emergency Preparedness

Prepared By: C. Ross, LPRO Analyst

Meeting Dates: 2/20

WHAT THE MEASURE DOES:

Honoring Brigadier General James Burdette Thayer (1922-2018).

ISSUES DISCUSSED:

EFFECT OF AMENDMENT:

No amendment.

BACKGROUND:

James Burdette Thayer was born in Portland on March 10, 1922, and raised by his grandparents on their family farm in rural Oregon. He graduated from Carlton High School in 1940 and attended the University of Oregon on a journalism scholarship. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, he answered his nation's call and enlisted in the United States Army. He was selected for Officer Candidate School shortly after enlistment, commissioned as a second lieutenant, and assigned to combat duty with the 71st Infantry Division, which was then operating in Normandy, France.

As a mine platoon commander, he trained soldiers in the methodology of clearing pathways and securing anti-personnel mines in areas near the Maginot Line while leading his platoon across France. When he was reassigned to command a reconnaissance platoon, he led many successful missions, one of which was a battle in a small Austrian town against a much larger enemy force which resulted in the surrender of more than 800 German troops. During a reconnaissance mission on May 4, 1945, he and his platoon discovered and liberated the Gunkirchen Lager concentration camp, saving the lives of approximately 15,000 prisoners. Brigadier General Thayer exemplified the core values of the United States Army, earning numerous medals and commendations for his heroic and selfless service in World War II, including the Silver Star and the Bronze Star.

After the war, Brigadier General Thayer returned to the University of Oregon and graduated with a degree in economics in 1947. He married Patricia Cunningham and together they raised five children: James Jr., Anne, John, Tommy and Mike. He enjoyed a long and illustrious career in business and as a civic leader. His countless leadership roles included serving as president of the Oregon Historical Society, president of the Beaverton Chamber of Commerce, president of the Port of Portland and interim president of Tuality Community Hospital.

Despite his very active and successful civilian life, Brigadier General Thayer also remained in military service after World War II, in the United States Army Reserve, retiring as a colonel in 1982. He continued his service to the nation as Oregon's civilian aide to the Secretary of the Army from 1989 to 1994, for which he was awarded the Secretary of Defense Medal for Outstanding Public Service. He was reactivated into military service in 2000 as commander of the Oregon State Defense Force, and promoted to brigadier general. He modernized the Defense Force, providing the State of Oregon with enhanced capacities for emergency preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery operations.

He was a coach, mentor and teacher to generations of Oregon National Guard troops, who recognized his humility, intelligence, leadership and patriotism. He was inducted into the Infantry Hall of Fame at Fort Benning, Georgia in 1991; awarded the Grand Decoration of Honor for Services to the Republic of Austria in 1996 for his

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role in liberating the Gunskirchen Lager concentration camp; and received the University of Oregon Alumni Association Distinguished Alumni Award in 2005.

Brigadier General Thayer always denied being a hero and spoke of his wartime service with quiet dignity. In 2017, reflecting on his service, he said, "Honor, duty and service to our country is something we just did, we never questioned it." He expressed the hope that "in our pursuit of freedom, tolerance and democracy, our world will be a better place for generations to come."

Brigadier General James Thayer died on September 16, 2018, a good and faithful servant to the State of Oregon and the nation. Senate Concurrent Resolution 19 celebrates his life and enduring legacy, with deepest respect for his reserve, his devotion, and his service to his nation, state and community.