

Jim Thayer – a steadfast friend, a mentor, a role model, a civic leader, a patriarch, a businessman, a Soldier – Pick one of those roles and we could talk about it for hours.

Jim's family has asked me to speak about his service to the nation, to the Army, and to the National Guard.

Let me begin by noting that Jim had a keen sense of history and the unit in which he served during WW2 was one with a great history and I believe he personally identified with and upheld the heroic traditions of that unit.

14th Infantry Regiment. Known as the "Golden Dragons" for the Chinese Dragon on their unit crest – representing their service in the Boxer Rebellion and in China in the early 20th Century. They were formed in the Civil War and their heroic exploits in 12 of the bloodiest campaigns of the Civil War were recognized by General George Meade – the Commander of the Army of the Potomac - when he gave them the place of honor at the "Right of the Line" in the Grand Review of the Armies held in the Capitol at the end of the Civil War.

To this day when members of the regiment greet each other the salutation is - Golden Dragons – the response is - Right of the Line.

Jim enlisted in the Army at the end of his sophomore year at the University of Oregon June 1942. He was selected for Officer Candidate School and was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant of Infantry in Oct of 1944 at Ft. Benning, GA and assigned to the 14th Infantry Regt, 71st Infantry Division – he was the leader of a Mine Platoon which was every bit as dangerous as one could imagine — the dark humor of the time (life expectancy for 2d LT of Infantry is 20 secs) they trained, they shipped out, they arrived in France 6 Feb 1945 – they were in action by 11 Mar 1945. Jim's 23rd birthday was 10 Mar 1945. The 71st breached the Siegfried Line and crossed the Rhine at Oppenheim on 30 Mar – and then began a dash across Germany and into Austria. Their mission was focused on the die hards of the SS that might move into the Austrian Alps and continue the fight in that redoubt – the 71st was assigned to cut them off in that race to Austria – the mine platoon became a recon platoon – finding the way ahead – so the Regt could move as expeditiously as possible.

In Germany they took Coburg – they captured Bayreuth on 18 April – they crossed the Danube, were in Austria 2 May and were at Gunskirchen Lager by 4 May – they met the Russians at Linz on 8 May and the cessation of hostilities took place - 9 May.

In that race - that Kaleidoscope of events - across Germany to Austria the 14,000 Soldiers of the 71st – lost 243 KIA, suffered 1114 casualties – there were 180 Silver Stars awarded for Gallantry in action. Jim received one of those Silver Stars for his part in capturing an SS Bn of 800 Soldiers. His little recon platoon of 16 men found them - fixed them in place - Jim negotiated with the German commander until his regiment could close and take them prisoner.

But his recon platoon didn't stop there - they kept on - forging ahead – and in an unintended encounter – stumbled on a concentration camp at Gunskirchen Lager. A camp that would have been by passed but for Jim's actions –

Let me read this excerpt written by CPT Pletcher of the 71st Division HQs.

“THE AMERICANS HAVE COME — AT LAST”

Capt. J. D. Pletcher, Berwyn, Ill., of the 71st Division Headquarters:

Driving up to the camp in our jeep, we, first knew we were approaching the camp by the hundreds of starving, half crazed inmates lining the roads, begging for food and cigarettes. Many of them had been able to get only a few hundred yards from the gate before they keeled over and died. As weak as they were, the chance to be free, the opportunity to escape was so great they couldn't resist, though it meant staggering only a few yards before death came.

“Then came the next indication of the camp's nearness – the smell. There was something about the smell of Gunskirchen I shall never forget. It was strong, yes, and permeating, too. “Of all the horrors of the place, the smell, perhaps, was the most startling of all. It was a smell made up of all kinds of odors – foul bodily odors, smoldering trash fires, – all mixed together in a heavy dank atmosphere, in a thick, muddy woods, where little breeze could go. The ground was pulpy throughout the camp, churned to a consistency of warm putty by the milling of thousands of feet. The smell of Gunskirchen nauseated many of the Americans who went there. It was a smell I'll never forget, completely different from anything I've ever encountered. It could almost be seen and hung over the camp like a fog of death.

“As we entered the camp, the living skeletons still able to walk crowded around us and, though we wanted to drive farther into the place, the milling, pressing crowd wouldn't let us. It is not an exaggeration to say that almost every inmate was insane with hunger. Just the sight of an American brought cheers, groans and shrieks. People crowded around to touch an American, to touch the jeep, to kiss our arms – perhaps just to make sure that it was true. The people who couldn't walk crawled out toward our jeep. Those who couldn't even crawl propped themselves up on an elbow, and somehow, through all their pain and suffering, revealed through their eyes the gratitude, the joy they felt at the arrival of Americans”.

One asked me if he could climb on the jeep to say a few words to his people. We helped him up on the hood and he yelled for order. He spoke in his native tongue – Hungarian I believe – and my guide interpreted for us. He told them that the Americans were bringing food and water and medical help. After every sentence he was interrupted by loud cheers from the crowd. It was almost like a political speech. Everyone was hysterical with joy at being found by the Americans, yet in a frenzy of hunger, for they had had no food since the Germans left two days before, and not enough to keep anyone alive for months before.

“None of the inmates of Gunskirchen will ever be the same again. I doubt if any of us who saw it will ever forget it — the smell, the hundreds of bodies that looked like caricatures of human beings, the frenzy of the thousands when they knew the Americans had arrived at last, the spark of joy in the eyes of those who lay in the ditches and whispered a prayer of thanks with their last breaths. I felt, the day I saw Gunskirchen Lager, that I finally knew what I was fighting for, what the war was all about.”

Was Jim a hero? He insisted he wasn't. He was in the right place to do the right thing – and he did it. He did his duty. LT Thayer – 23 years old. In the capture of 800 SS, he was recognized for gallantry in action but perhaps more importantly he found, aided and perhaps saved thousands by his actions at Gunskirchen Lager.

The war was over.

Jim – came home – he never stopped serving. Look at his civilian life – look at his community and business accomplishments – they are legion.

Military – he found the time to stay in uniform to become a Colonel in the Army Reserve.

He later was appointed

- Civilian Aide to SECAR – 1988 – 2 decades
- Official DOD 50th Anniversary WW2 Commemorations – special envoy for SECAR
- And most appropriately – although our Army is no longer organized in Regiments, we retain our Regimental lineage and honors at the battalion level and maintain an honorary regimental headquarters. - Jim in the 1990's was appointed the Honorary Colonel of the 14th Infantry Regiment a truly significant recognition having come from the lowest officer grade in this heroic and historic regiment, his beloved *14th Infantry*.
- His last duty was in service to the state of Oregon as the General Officer in a command of our Oregon State Defense Force.

How do you remember Jim? Humble? Gentlemanly? smiling? caring? devoutly religious?

I remember him as a leader who was concerned for his fellow Soldiers – those who served their country and gave their all and - to answer my earlier question – Was Jim a hero?

I say: Yes!

I say regardless of whether he was wearing the cloth of his country's army, the coat of a businessman, the shirtsleeves of a community leader, beneath that cloth there beat a hero's heart. Beneath that cloth beat a hero's heart.

The West Point Alma Mater ends simply. When our course on earth is run – May it be said – WELL DONE!

Well done – Jim Thayer – Well done.

