

Last Sunday, Sandy Thomas died. He was 98 years old, and lived a very full life.

After the war, he wrote a book called 'Dare to be Free', that talked about his exploits during the war, his captivity and subsequent escape via the Holy Mountain. This book, I know, was instrumental in attracting many people to Mount Athos.

He was first cousin to my late father-in-law, and I was volunteered to provide some maps for the re-publication of 'Dare to be Free'. This led me to the FoMA path-clearers, and thus to a new life as a cartographer. He took huge pleasure when I called him from the Holy Mountain, and always told me that he thought about Athos every day!

I last spoke to him more than a month ago.

Peter Howorth

An obituary by his son-in-law follows:

## **Major-General WB "Sandy" Thomas**

**29<sup>th</sup> June 1919 to 22<sup>nd</sup> Oct 2017**

Major-General WB "Sandy" Thomas CB, DSO, MC and Bar, ED, Silver Star USA, only managed to get it half right – "Live hard, die young". He lived to 98, and that alone is incredible considering how many times he was shot at, bombed, stabbed, and imprisoned during a thrilling and highly successful military career.

Prior to WWII he was blessed with a carefree youth on the family farm at Motueka in a particularly beautiful part of New Zealand's South Island. He embarked on a rather mundane career in banking until the war came, and he immediately enlisted and was carted off to defend Crete with the 23 NZ Battalion. When the Germans launched a paratroop invasion of Crete, things got quite savage, and during a counter-attack against the invaders, Sandy, then a 22-year old second lieutenant, suffered severe grenade and bullet wounds to his thigh, and was taken prisoner - but not before earning his first Military Cross. The official citation reads like a Hollywood block-buster: "Lt Thomas led his platoon in an attack on enemy parachute troops who had landed and established themselves in strong positions. His platoon accounted for 25 enemy dead and 3 prisoners. Of that number Lt Thomas personally dispatched five. On the following day when his platoon was being shelled by a Bofors gun, Lt Thomas brought into action a captured mortar, getting a direct hit on the gun and putting it out of action. He then bombed the aerodrome and led a counter attack on the village of Galatea. He was an inspiration to his men, setting an example for cheerfulness, initiative and courage seldom surpassed." Sandy always believed that Crete should never have fallen, but in those early war years Allied defeat was depressingly everywhere.

From Crete his German captors flew him out to a prison hospital in Salonika, and it was here that he became a tenacious escape artist. One attempt involved him playing dead and being carted out in a coffin. This would have worked had he not fallen asleep, and his snoring alerted the guards. After 3 failed attempts, however, he finally succeeded in getting

away, and began a truly epic journey, with vengeful Germans chasing him from Salonika to the fabled Holy Mountain of Mount Athos. Here the monks hid him until he was able to “borrow” a sailing boat of sorts and sail across the tempestuous Aegean Sea to Turkey. He wrote a best-selling book about this adventure, called “Dare to be Free”.

After rejoining his battalion his military skills really started to shine. The 23<sup>rd</sup> NZ helped push the previously invincible Rommel from Egypt all the way to Tunisia, during which time Sandy earned his DSO and his second MC. From there the Battalion was shipped off to Italy where a still lethal German army was putting up a stubborn defence, and all Sandy’s superiors – each a close friend - were killed or wounded. Thus Sandy found himself as a Lt-Colonel commanding the over-achieving 23<sup>rd</sup> NZ Battalion at the age of 24 – and a very good commander he turned out to be – if a little young. He was the youngest battalion commander in the New Zealand army. He earned his “Silver Star” (the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest award in the US military) by helping the US General Marcus Clark and his Americans fight through to northern Italy. These incredible adventures became fodder for his second book “Pathways to Adventure”. His old CO from Crete days, General Freyberg, later Lord Freyberg, said this of Sandy: “I have watched him develop from a very young 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt through all the ranks, until in the last year of the war he became one of the most dashing and seasoned commanding officers of infantry in the New Zealand Army.

After the end of the war, rather wisely Sandy forgot about his earlier career as a bank clerk, and applied to join the British army – which organisation made the enlightened decision to accept him with open arms. So began his inexorable path to the top. His first piece of action came during the Malayan Emergency where he distinguished himself. Next he found himself in Kenya during the Mau Mau, and wrote his third book “Mask of Evil” – a gripping thriller about life during the very dangerous Mau Mau period.

At the ripe young age of 51 Sandy became a Major-General, and he was posted to Singapore as GOC Far Eastern Command ( FARELF), during which time he presided over the orderly hand-over of Singapore to Lee Kwan Yew.

Sandy retired to a farm in South East Queensland, Australia – not his beloved but chilly New Zealand – mainly because of the poor health of his wife Iredale. He set to work with his usual enthusiasm to single-handedly plant and nurture thousands of trees, and create a truly beautiful property, where he lived surrounded by friends and family until his death. He is survived by three daughters, 4 grandchildren, and 5 great grandchildren.