

A Life Lived

Stories about South Jersey residents who died within the past month, leaving lasting marks on their community, neighborhood, friends or families. If you have a suggestion for A Life Lived, email lifelived@pressofac.com



Staff photo by Ben Fogletto, Sept. 23, 2000

The Rev. Norman Thomas blesses animals at the Humane Society of Atlantic County in Atlantic City.

Galloway man lived to serve God, country

By MARTIN DeANGELIS

Staff Writer

The Rev. Norman Thomas didn't have an easy life, but parts of it were harder than others.

In the D-Day invasion of France in 1944, his best buddy got shot right in front of him. That was hard, and so was his time in the Battle of the Bulge and more of World War II — his U.S. Army 30th Infantry Division took massive casualties fighting its way across Europe.

Thomas, of Northfield, lived to 91 himself before he died last month. Still, he never forgot how close he was to not coming home from the war.

At one point after D-Day, he and another soldier were the only American survivors in an area overrun by German soldiers. Thomas and his friend hid in an underground ammunition bunker — and had to stay absolutely still, and silent, or face being captured or killed.

"There was no light, so he didn't know how long they were in there. But he figured it was about two days," says his oldest son, Norman Jr., of Linwood.

That's when Norman Sr., who grew up in a family of clammers in Galloway Township, made a vow that became his career:

"He said, 'Lord, if you get me out of here, I'll serve you the rest of my life,'" his son says.

When the Germans moved on, the Americans escaped. Norman Sr. was wounded in the war, but he made it home to the love of his life, Dottie. The two were so close, one family story is they would split Hershey bars with nuts — Dottie ate the chocolate, Norman got the almonds.

By the time he got home from the war, his oldest son was 16 months old. (Dottie had a girl in 1943, but "our little Suzie," as her father always called her, died five days later.) A second son, Stephen, was born in 1950.

Norman got a railroad job, doing overnight shifts on the Delaware River, a 90-minute drive. In the morning, he'd head home for his clamming tools — to make a penny a clam, a hard way to feed a family.

But he never forgot his promise in the bunker. And in 1960, he went to school to become a Methodist minister.

"He dedicated his whole life to God and country," his son says — adding the Rev. Thomas even held annual God and Country services at the little church he led as pastor for 38 years, Bethany St. John's Methodist in Pleasantville.

He was a member of many veterans groups, and was also president of the Atlantic County Humane Society. He loved animals, says his friend, Crystal Orchard, of Mays Landing, who delivered the eulogy at his funeral. She also gave the eulogy for Dottie, who died in 2007.

That was one more thing this minister was known for: Every year, he had a Blessing of the Animals service, in which all kinds of animals were welcome.

He believed in his traditions. He also believed in his religion.

A Life Lived appears Tuesdays and Saturdays.

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Reverend Norman H. Thomas Sr.

THOMAS, REVEREND NORMAN H. SR. - went home to be with his Lord on Thanksgiving Day, Thursday, November 22, 2012. Born December 10, 1920 in Conover town where he enjoyed a childhood of fishing and sailing on Absecon bay. Norman served his country proudly during [World War II](#) in the U.S. [Army](#) 30th Division where he was a highly decorated soldier receiving many medals; among them were the Silver Star and [Purple Heart](#) for his actions under enemy fire during the Battle of the Bulge, which was one of five battles he fought in. After an honorable discharge, Norman went to work for the PR Railroad where he worked for many years. Norman studied and graduated from the Methodist Seminary School where he was ordained and became a Pastor of the Conover town United Methodist Church and Bethany St. John's United Methodist Church, serving for over 38 years. Norman always listened to people, never leaving anyone out and had a passion for serving his community. This translated into years of volunteer service for many veterans groups and organizations. Norman also served as Chaplain for the State of New Jersey American Legion, honorary member of the Jewish War Veterans, President of the Atlantic Co. Humane Society, and President of the Van Kouwenoven-Conover Family Association. Norman was predeceased by his beloved wife of 66 years, Dorothy "Dottie"; daughter Susie; brothers Larry, Leon, and Clayton; sisters Eva Mae and Doris; and grandson Tad. Norman is survived by his sons, Norman, Jr. (Marcia) and Stephen (Flora); grand-children: Ashley, Marla, and Bonnie Lee; great grand-children: Derek, Allie, Maia, and Eva; extended family Cho Gallagher (Paul), Christine Laskin (Mark), Sarah and Jared; and many cousins and nephews. A funeral service will be held on Friday, November 30, 2012 at 11:00am at Adams-Perfect Funeral Home, 1650 New Road, Northfield. Visitation will be held from 9:00am until the time of the service. Interment will be held in Greenwood Cemetery, Pleasantville. The family requests memorial contributions be made to Bethany St. John's United Methodist Church, P.O. Box 609, Pleasantville, NJ 08232. Arrangements entrusted to and condolences may be left for his family at: adams-perfect.com

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