

Senate Concurrent Resolution 19
In Memoriam: Brigadier General James Burdette Thayer
1922-2018
Oregon House of Representatives
June 5, 2019
Comments by Rep. Evans

Thayer was born in Portland, Oregon, on March 10, 1922. He was a descendant of Sylvanus Thayer, who is known as the "Father of West Point".

When he was four, his parents divorced and Thayer moved to his grandparents' farm in Carlton, Oregon. He attended Carlton High School, where he was editor of the school newspaper.

During his junior year, he participated in the Oregon High School Press Conference and was elected the conference president. He graduated from high school in 1940, earning a journalism scholarship to the University of Oregon for his newspaper work.

After high school, Thayer enrolled in the University of Oregon's journalism school.

He became the advertising manager for the *Oregon Daily Emerald*, the university's student newspaper. However, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor changed the direction of his life.

In 1942, Thayer left college at the end of his sophomore year and joined the Army.

He entered service at the Presidio of Monterey as an infantry private, but was selected for Officer Candidate School shortly after induction.

He was trained as a mine platoon leader at Fort Benning, Georgia.

He was commissioned a second lieutenant on October 3, 1944, and assigned to a front-line anti-tank company in the 71st Infantry Division, which was operating in Normandy at the time.

As a mine platoon commander, Thayer led his unit across France and into Germany. Along the way, he taught soldiers how to clear minefields along the Maginot Line.

Thayer was then reassigned as a reconnaissance platoon leader. That unit included 16 men, two half-tracks, and a jeep. In 1945, his platoon engaged German SS troops who were occupying a small Austrian town.

In the battle, his platoon killed 31 German soldiers. When reinforcements from his battalion arrived, 800 German soldiers surrendered.

For this action, Thayer was awarded a Silver Star.

On May 4, 1945, Thayer's platoon was hunting for German ammunition dumps near Wels, Austria. As they followed a remote forest road, the platoon began to find dead, dying, and emaciated people.

That forest changed the lives of all who were there.

At the end of the road, Thayer and his men discovered and liberated the Gunskirchen Lager concentration camp, part of the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp complex, saving approximately 15,000 Hungarian Jews as well as several hundred political prisoners from starvation.

On that May 4, 1945, the 71st Infantry Division liberated Gunskirchen. When troops of the 71st entered the camp, they learned that the SS guards had fled the corpse-littered camp days before.

Some 15,000 prisoners were still in the camp. In the months following the liberation, some 1,500 former prisoners died as a consequence of their mistreatment by the Nazis.

One member of the 71st Infantry recounted his first impressions of Gunskirchen:

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.

Captain Pletcher (colleague of Thayer)

During the war, Thayer also earned a Bronze Star for heroism. After the war, he continued his service in the Army Reserve, serving in a unit based in Vancouver, Washington.

He retired from the Army Reserve as a colonel in 1982.

Thayer returned to the University of Oregon after the war, graduating in 1947 with a Bachelor of Science degree in economics. In 1954, Thayer married Patricia Cunningham, a teacher from

Seattle. They settled on a 5-acre (0.020 km²) farm in Beaverton, where they raised five children. A year later, he founded the *J. Thayer Company*, an office supply business.

The firm was also located in Beaverton. Eventually, the company became the largest independent office-supply company in the western United States.

Over the years, Thayer served as president of the Oregon Historical Society, president of the Port of Portland, and president of the Beaverton Chamber of Commerce.

He was also chairman of the Tuality Community Hospital board.

Thayer was a member of the board of trustees for Reed College and the board of directors for General Telephone and Electric of the Northwest, the Oregon Graduate Institute of Science and Technology, and the Knappton Corporation (now Brix Maritime Company).

In addition, he served on the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Commission. In 1988, Thayer was serving on the Tuality Community Hospital board of directors.

After a nurses' strike and a management breakup, Thayer agreed to step in and serve as the hospital's interim president. He held the position for five months, until the staff problems were resolved.

During that short period, Thayer not only restored harmony to the staff, he also increased the hospital's annual earnings by \$4.1 million.

In 1989, Thayer was appointed Oregon's civilian aid to the Secretary of the Army. While serving in this position in 1991, he was inducted into the Infantry Hall of Fame in Fort Benning.

A year later, he represented the Secretary of Defense at a World War II commemoration ceremony held by the Austrian government. At the ceremony, Thayer was personally recognized for his role in liberating the Gunskirchen Lager concentration camp.

When he left the position in 1994, Thayer was awarded the Secretary of Defense Medal for Outstanding Public Service.

In 2000, Thayer was re-activated into military service and promoted to brigadier general. He was then assigned as commander of the Oregon State Defense Force.

Seventy-Five years ago, today, Lieutenant James B. Thayer was, like the rest of the world, waiting for news...

06 June 1944 OPERATION OVERLORD commenced: we know it as D-Day, the Normandy Landings...

130,000 to 156,000 troops landed on D-Day –

Roughly 65,000 from the US, the remainder from our Allies, mostly from Commonwealth lands.

By 11 June 1944 (D+5) over 326,000 troops, 54,000 vehicles, and 104,000 tons of supplies had landed in France.

By 30 June (D+24) over 850,000 troops, 148,000 vehicles, 570,000 tons of supplies had landed in France.

The scale, shape, and size of OVERLORD, of our European Theater campaign has been lessened, weakened through the passage of time.

The stakes were as real as they could be: had we lost, which was possible until the Battle of the Bulge was determined – would have left Hitler's Germany virtually unstoppable.

And, for whatever reason – there are people today who apparently refuse to accept the absolute craven brutality of the Nazi Regime and its method of genocide as political instrument.

It was within that cauldron – that fight, for humanity, that young James B. Thayer led, inspired, and succeeded.