

MSS. Collection #94

Francis Edgar Thomas Papers, ca. 1944-1974. 3 boxes (126 folders) ca. 850 items.

NOTE: The numbers cited in parentheses, e.g. 1:5, refer the researcher to the Series#:Folder# in which that name/topic will be found.

INTRODUCTION

The bulk of the Francis Edgar Thomas Papers date from 1944-1945 when Thomas was stationed in England as a Public Relations Specialist. Researchers interested in the United States Air Forces during World War II will find this collection of interest. It provides a view of the war through the eyes of someone not directly involved in combat.

The collection focuses primarily on Thomas's military career with some items from civilian life. It contains a variety of printed materials, such as bulletins, pamphlets, and newspapers, as well as photographs, maps, and correspondence. Of particular note are the Hometown Stories written by Thomas. These press releases profile men in the 453rd Heavy Bombardment Group, including achievements and daily activities on the bomber base. The releases were sent with photographs to hometown newspapers for publication, but few photos remain.

Also of interest are photographs, correspondence, and miscellaneous materials from a Christmas party held for orphaned children in war-ravaged Nantes, France, by members of the 453rd. Included are photos by *Life Magazine* war correspondent and photographer, Eliot Elisofon.

Arrangement: This collection arranged into eight series by subject and document type. Within each series, materials are arranged by document type, then alphabetically. The series are: **453rd USAF**, ca. 1944; **Clarke, Allan Hugh**, ca. 1944; **Literary**, ca. 1944; **Maps**, ca. 1944; **Photographs**, ca. 1944; **Printed**, ca. 1943-1945; **Stewart, Jimmy**; and **Thomas, F. Edgar**, ca. 1943-1953. Seven bound volumes of the newspapers *Stars and Stripes* (5 vol.; 1944-45) and *Yank* (2 vol.; 1944-45) were removed and placed in oversize, flat storage.

Provenance: The materials in this collection belonged to Thomas and were acquired mostly during his military service. His sister, Susannah Thomas Watson, donated the collection in May 1990, and it was assigned the accession number 1990.55.10.

Processing: Peter Austin began processing this collection. The arrangement and finding aid were completed by Christine A. Dumoulin, Archives Assistant, November 2000.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Francis Edgar Thomas was born on November 10, 1911, and grew up in Wadesboro, NC. He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and after graduation, moved to Greensboro and taught in the public school system from 1937-1942. On September 17, 1942, Thomas was drafted into the Army Air Corps and remained on inactive duty until December 2, 1942. While on active duty from December 3, 1942 to February 3, 1946, he served as a Public

Relations Specialist for the 453rd Heavy Bombardment Group, 8th Air Force, stationed in England during World War II. Part of his duties included shielding actor Jimmy Stewart from the press. After leaving the service in 1946, Thomas taught history at Smith High School in Greensboro. In the early 1960s, he was appointed General Manager for *The Lost Colony*. He was also the director of public relations at Longwood College in Virginia. Thomas was never married. He died on August 22, 1986, in Salisbury, NC at age 74.

Biographical Sources: The sources used to compile this biographical note include the original accession sheet, the newspaper article “Thomas’ Aim: Telling ‘Lost Colony’ Story” (*Durham Morning Herald*, January 21, 1962 (6:12.1)), and his obituary (*Greensboro News & Record*, August 24, 1986).

SCOPE & CONTENT NOTE

The types of materials in this collection include certificates, correspondence, maps, photographs, and printed material such as bulletins, pamphlets, newspapers and clippings.

The bulk of the collection relates to Thomas’s time as a public relations specialist in the 453rd USAF. His main duties focused on writing articles about the 453rd USAF and its bombing missions without divulging classified information. Included were profiles of approximately 200 enlisted men and their overseas activities for their hometown papers (1:12-36). These Hometown Stories detailed events such as shooting down enemy aircraft, promotions, awards, and biographical information. For example, Donald F. Strahan, a weather officer from Wayne, Nebraska, was promoted from 1st Lieutenant to Captain in 1944; he helped determine the weather forecast on which allied fighters and bombers depended. Jess L. Gerdiny of Wichita Falls, TX, was a group photographic officer, responsible for the installation of aerial cameras for bombardment photos, film processing of ground and aerial photos, and preparation of all photo records of the B-24 liberator base; he was cited for “Outstanding performance of duty.” Also included are numerous clippings (6:12.1-6) and a scrapbook (1:38) about the 453rd and its members. The photographs (1:37) show life on the bomber base from preparing for and returning from missions to leisure activities such as songfests and travel in the English countryside.

The collection does have weaknesses. While it provides a clear picture of Thomas as an enlisted man, it contains little about his civilian life. Although he lived in Greensboro and taught at Smith High School, no materials directly relate to the school or to Greensboro. In addition, the range of materials is limited to a two-year period, with only a few documents from later years.

SERIES DESCRIPTIONS

1. 453rd USAF. 38 folders (ca. 350 items). ca. 1944.

During World War II, Thomas was stationed with the 453rd Heavy Bombardment Group based in East Anglia, England; the unit was in operation for 15 months. Members of the unit flew B-24 Liberator bombers on missions over Germany to cripple the Nazi aircraft industry in 1944. The unit flew approximately 200 missions over 11 months.

The subseries Correspondence (1:1-4) is primarily of a personal nature. In a letter to Thomas dated August 28, 1974, Ramsay D. Potts reminisces about the 8th Air Force and expresses his gratitude for Thomas's work. A letter from Thomas to the Carroll Stewart Family speaks of a reunion in Florida. Folder 1:4 contains several items pertaining to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, including a Hinton James Day celebration in England with former UNC-CH students in the 8th Air Force, and a proposal to procure University of North Carolina Press books in English for a war-ravaged school library in Lyon, France.

The French Christmas Party (1:5-10) shows a glimpse of humanity during the war. On December 25, 1944, the 453rd bomber unit and members of the Red Cross held a Christmas party for some 3000 orphaned children in Nantes, France. Using their rations to purchase soaps, candy, food, and toiletries for presents, the unit wrapped the gifts and transported them via the liberator plane *Liberty Run*. The series includes correspondence (1:5-7), party scripts, flight plans, and schedules (1:8), and photos of the event (1:9). Among the Christmas party photographs are fourteen taken by Eliot Elisofon (1:10). Elisofon was a photographer and war correspondent for *Life Magazine*. Although known for his photography on African culture, these photos illustrate some of his wartime work.

Folders 1:12-36 contain press releases written by Thomas about the different members of the 453rd unit. These Hometown Stories chronicle the activities of the enlisted men and women through articles and photographs that were sent to local newspapers across the United States. Each folder is organized alphabetically.

The subseries Photographs (1:37) contains approximately ten images of different aspects of the bomber base. Several portraits include an American Red Cross worker with three enlisted men in front of a series of paintings by Allan Hugh Clarke, a wedding with Edgar Thomas in the photo and base buildings as a backdrop, and three American Red Cross workers in front of the club mobile. Three official Air Forces photos include two of airplanes purchased with war bonds and the people who raised them--Roosevelt Junior High School and the Jewish War Veterans-Post. No. 156, Ladies Auxiliary. The third official photo shows members of the British Navy learning how to use a fire extinguisher. Folder 1:38 is a scrapbook of newspaper clippings about the 453rd, its members and missions; it includes several articles on Col. James Stewart.

2. Clarke, Allan Hugh. 5 folders (ca. 52 items). ca. 1944.

Allan Hugh Clarke was a member of the 453rd unit as a tailgunner on the B-24 liberator *Jughead*. He used his off-duty hours to draw and paint the people and activities of the unit. While some of his paintings were sold to the Department of Education in Pittsburgh, the whereabouts of the remaining paintings are unknown.

This series contains some correspondence between Thomas and Clarke (2:2), biographical sketches of some of his subjects (2:1), and a series of photos of some of his artwork (2:3). The names mentioned in the biographical sketches are written on the folder in alphabetical order and indexed.

3. Literary. 3 folders (5 items). ca. 1944.

Researchers interested in women's roles during World War II will find this series interesting. It contains a draft article of "10,000 Men and a Girl" (3:1), photos (3:2), and the magazine article, "10,000 Men and a Girl," on Peggy O'Mara, a Red Cross worker who was stationed in

England. Written by Carroll W. Stewart, it details the activities of O'Mara as a Red Cross worker and the important role she played in being a liaison for soldiers and their families, bringing food to soldiers after flying missions, and operating the canteen.

4. Maps. 4 folders (6 items). ca. 1944.

This series consists of both military and civilian maps. The military maps (4:1, 4:4) were used as navigational tools by the fighter pilots. The civilian maps (4:2-3) are of England and Wales, and a war map of Europe for people at home to see where servicemen were fighting and stationed.

5. Photographs. 8 folders (ca. 165 items). ca. 1944.

The photos in this collection are a combination of both military and personal photos. They provide researchers with a glimpse of life on the bomber base and those who worked in the public relations office. Those interested in aviation and World War II liberator planes will find not only photos of the bombers *The Little Gramper*, *Zeus*, (5:1), and *Lonesome Polecat* (5:8), but also aerial views of several bombing missions over Germany (5:2). These air strike photos range from before and after dropping bombs on the aerial targets of Chateaudun, Berlin, Hamburg, Wesel, and Politz, but also views of the targets below. One aerial view of Wesel shows buildings, homes, and a church damaged by bombs and fire. Folders 5:6-7 show the crash of two liberators, the *Golden Gaboon* and the *Robins Glen*.

The Bomber Base folder contains approximately seven images of the outside of the mess hall and the surrounding area after a heavy rain. One shows a line of men waiting in the mud to get into the mess hall as well as military trucks (5:3).

Folder 5:4 includes three unidentified landscape/building photos, probably taken somewhere in England. Approximately 35 photos show different aspects of the base (5:8), providing a glimpse of daily duties such as dishwashing in the mess hall and leisure activities such as a sing along and other programs. Five photos show bombs being loaded onto an aircraft and crates being unloaded outside the base buildings. Approximately 12 photos are portraits of different 453rd members and officers who are unidentified. Researchers can also see the parts of the English countryside, most likely East Anglia where the base was located.

6. Printed Materials. 29 folders (101 items). ca. 1943-45.

This series is an interesting collection of wartime publications and personal items from ca. 1943 to 1945. The majority of bulletins, pamphlets, and newspapers are military publications. *Facts in Review* and *Bulletins from Britain* give researchers a broader look at the issues surrounding World War II from British and German perspectives. Other interesting items include the broadside "This is Our Affair," a Communist propaganda piece about the invasion of Czechoslovakia (6:1) and a pocket card "Not to be produced in public" (6:20), with different phrases in Dutch, Spanish, French, and German. Soldiers who were lost, crossing enemy lines, etc. used this. "Now What Do You Want?" (6:21) is a pamphlet about the benefits of the veterans association, and the pamphlet "Message to Women" (6:18) was put out (August 10, 1941) by Queen Elizabeth of England, addressing the American women and their important role in the war. The newspapers *The Scuttlebutt*, *The Liberator* (6:11), *Stars and Stripes* (6:12.3),

Yank (6:12.4), and the newspaper clippings (6:12.1-12.2), give firsthand accounts of the war in Europe.

7. Stewart, Jimmy. 3 folders (7 items).

This series contains articles (7:1, 7:3) and photographs (7:2) of Jimmy Stewart during his stint in the military in World War II. While best known as an actor, Col. James Stewart entered the Army in March 1941. During his tenure, he was eventually promoted to Colonel in the 8th Air Force, 453rd Heavy Bombardment Unit. He was also awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his leadership role in bombing missions over Germany. While in the service, he chose to put aside his movie star image and wanted no special treatment. Three of the photos (7:2) show Stewart while on duty riding in a jeep, discussing flight plans with fellow pilots, and walking away from the liberator *Male Call*. Another photo shows Stewart as he is officially promoted to Colonel. These photos were sent to American newspapers. Also included are two photos of a painting of Stewart by Allan Hugh Clarke.

8. Thomas, F. Edgar. 36 folders (ca. 160 items). ca. 1943-1953.

This series consists of materials that personally belonged to Thomas and from his military service. Folders 8:1-3 contain limited correspondence dating from 1943-1953, primarily general letters of appointment to the Air Forces. Folders 8:5-22 are papers from his "201" personnel file, including discharge papers (8:7), medical forms (8:11), financial (8:8-11), and resume (8:19).

The subseries souvenirs (8:27-35) consists mostly of items relating to Thomas's social activities in the service and when he was discharged. From the military is an interesting chemical warfare reference card used to identify different types of poisoning by gas (8:30). City guides for San Francisco and London, England, show different restaurants, transportation, and area nightspots (8:31). Two cocktail napkins represent Blanchard's and Don the Beachcombers, possibly officers' clubs (8:32), while a drink menu (8:35) and guest membership card (8:34) came from the Hotel Knickerbocker in Chicago. Also included is a guide to Camp Myles Standish (8:33), from which enlisted men embarked for the European theater of the war.

The photos folder (8:25) is somewhat more personal in nature. Approximately 10 interior photos of the PRO office show Thomas working with other PR staff members. Four portraits depict Thomas in uniform, both inside the PR office and outdoors; one is in his non-dress uniform cleaning his mess kit. Several group photos shows members of the PR staff outside the office; most of the members are unidentified.

Researchers interested in classified military documents will find the subseries Special Orders (8:36) interesting, as it contains sensitive information about strategic locations of bomber bases, orders where the men would be stationed, etc.

FOLDER LISTING

<u>Series</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Contents</u>	
1	1	453rd USAF	-- Correspondence -- Background Info
	2	"	-- Correspondence -- letters to F. Edgar Thomas
	3	"	-- Correspondence -- letters from F. Edgar Thomas
	4	"	-- Correspondence -- UNC-CH
	5	453rd USAF	-- French Christmas Party -- Correspondence -- Gibson, Harvey
	6	"	-- French Christmas Party -- Correspondence -- Press Release
	7	"	-- French Christmas Party -- Correspondence -- F.E. Thomas
	8	"	-- French Christmas Party -- Miscellaneous
	9	453rd USAF	-- French Christmas Party -- Photos
	10	"	-- French Christmas Party -- Photos -- Eliot Elisofon
	11	"	-- French Christmas Party -- Printed -- Menu
	12-36	"	-- Hometown Stories
	37	453rd USAF	-- Photographs
	38	"	-- Scrapbook
2	1	Clarke, Allan Hugh	-- Biographical Sketches
	2	"	-- Paintings -- Correspondence
	3	"	-- Paintings -- Photos
	4	Clarke, Allan Hugh	-- Paintings -- Photos -- Air Field Scenes
	5	"	-- Paintings -- Photos -- Miscellaneous
3	1	Literary	-- 10,000 Men and a Girl -- Draft
	2	"	-- 10,000 Men and a Girl -- Photos
	3	"	-- 10,000 Men and a Girl -- Printed -- Magazine article
4	1	Maps -- Civilian	-- England and Wales (2 items)
	2	"	-- European War Map
	3	Maps -- Military	-- Europe (Air)
	4	"	-- Special Maps (2 items)
5	1	Photographs	-- Airplanes
	2	"	-- Air Strikes
	3	"	-- Bomber Base
	4	"	-- Landscapes -- Europe
	5	Photographs	-- Negatives
	6	"	-- Plane Crashes -- <i>Golden Gaboon</i>
	7	"	-- Plane Crashes -- <i>Robins Glen</i>
	8	"	-- PRO Personnel
6	1	Printed	-- Broadside, "This is Our Affair"
	2	"	-- Brochure, "American Red Cross Service Club"

<u>Series</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Contents</u>	
6	3	Printed	-- Bulletins, "Army Talk"
	4	"	-- Bulletins, "Bulletins From Britain"
	5	"	-- Bulletins, "The Bulletin of American Veterans Committee"
	6	"	-- Bulletins, "Facts in Review"
	7	Printed	-- Certificate -- Army Appointment
	8	"	-- Certificates -- "Lost Colony Certificate of Appreciation"
	9	"	-- Certificates -- Officer Training School
	10	"	-- Miscellaneous
	11	Printed	-- Newspapers -- <i>The Scuttlebutt</i> and <i>The Liberator</i>
	12.1	"	-- Newspapers -- Clippings
	12.2	"	-- Newspapers -- Clippings
	12.3	"	-- Newspapers -- <i>Stars and Stripes</i>
	12.4	Printed	-- Newspapers -- <i>Yank</i>
	13	"	-- Pamphlets -- "Army Talks"
	14	"	-- Pamphlets -- "Battle of Britain"
	15	"	-- Pamphlets -- "Britain Today"
	16	Printed	-- Pamphlets -- "Correspondence..."
	17	"	-- Pamphlets -- "Le Bombardement de Poletzi"
	18	"	-- Pamphlets -- "Message to Women..." (1941)
	19	"	-- Pamphlets -- "Neptune"
	20	Printed	-- Pamphlets -- "Not to be Produced..."
	21	"	-- Pamphlets -- "Now What Do You Want"
	22	"	-- Pamphlets -- "War In Pictures"
	23	"	-- Pamphlets -- "What are We Fighting For"
	24	Printed	-- Programs -- Royal Albert Hall
	25	"	-- Programs -- Theater Royal
	26	"	-- Roster
	27	"	-- Second Air Division Memorial
7	1	Stewart, Jimmy	-- Literary -- Biographical Sketch
	2	"	-- Photos
	3	"	-- Printed
8	1	Thomas, F. Edgar	-- Correspondence -- 1943-1945
	2	"	-- Correspondence -- 1946-1953
	3	"	-- Correspondence -- Undated
	4	"	-- Literary -- Rosters
	5	Thomas, F. Edgar	-- Military -- Certificates
	6	"	-- Military -- Check List
	7	"	-- Military -- Discharge Papers
	8	"	-- Military -- Financial -- Allotment of Pay

<u>Series</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Contents</u>
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	27	“ -- Souvenirs -- Correspondence -- Postcard
	28	“ -- Souvenirs -- Currency
	29	Thomas, F. Edgar -- Souvenirs -- Financial -- Receipts
	30	“ -- Souvenirs -- Printed -- Chemical Warfare Guide
	31	“ -- Souvenirs -- Printed -- City Guides
	32	“ -- Souvenirs -- Printed -- Cocktail Napkins
	33	Thomas, F. Edgar -- Souvenirs -- Printed -- Guide -- Camp Myles Standish
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Note: The numbers following the name/subject entry – e.g. 1:1 – indicate in which Series#:Folder# (or, if no “:”, Series only) that name/topic can be found.

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