

Eulogy, 7 December 1995 for M.R. Thurman

P.F.Gorman

In our faith we have been taught that we will proceed, with grace, from our present plight as members of the Church Militant to join the Church Triumphant, those of our community who have preceded us into eternal reunion with the Creator.

We meet today certain that Max Thurman, one of the more recently departed members of the Church Militant - and truly a fighter - is at this moment triumphant, celebrating his release from the prison of pain, boredom, and uncertainty that he has endured for these past five and one half years. We can visualize his victory parade, he being borne through the verdant pastures of heaven by seraphim and cherubim, the freckled face alight with the characteristic ear-to-ear grin, hand raised in the palm-down wave, the procession marching to his "Be All That You Can Be" theme music, led by the Archangel Sigismund Belcher.

Max is liberated; Max is home. Let us celebrate with him. We who have been privileged to know Max Thurman on both a professional and personal level have ample cause to rejoice, for we have known human greatness, genuine heroism, warm humanity.

The Army will mourn his passing today, as it should, for here lies an extraordinary man who served his faith, his family, his friends, the United States Army, and his country as have few soldiers of any era. Here lies a man of exceptional fortitude. The past few years have sorely tried his courage, subjecting him to extremes of physical and mental duress, and yet, up until his very last bout with his disease, he continued the work of his lifetime, advising the young on how to confront the challenges facing the Army and the Department of Defense. I watched him coaching a Colonel in September, fresh from ministrations at Walter Reed, clearly stiff, swollen and uncomfortable, but in all other respects vivacious, humorous, and sage in counsel.

Here lies a man of wit. Just weeks ago, I visited him at the hospital. Max initially had little to say. I guessed that he was having trouble talking, so I told him about General Tasker Bliss, who like Max had been told that he would never leave the hospital. A visitor asked General Bliss if, looking back over his years of distinguished service, he had any regrets. Bliss responded, thinking of the Army Air Corps, that indeed he did, that he should never have let the SOBs out of the Signal Corps. I then framed the same question, "Max, do you have any regrets?" Without hesitation he responded, distinctly and emphatically: "I regret that I am unable to top Tasker Bliss."

Max Thurman brought to his long struggle against leukemia the determination, the resolute pursuit of perfectibility, the sense of humor, and the humility that characterized his approach to all the major problems that he had to tackle throughout his life.

Here lies one of the great soldiers of the past half-century. A few years ago, someone asked Max of what he was proudest in his military career. He answered, "I am proud of the fact that I was the guy who had the monkey on his back." So he was, throughout his career, the right leader in a position pivotal for the future Army:

In 1989, when President Bush was forced to military action in Panama, Maxwell Thurman was Commander in Chief, U.S. Southern Command. The Nation can be thankful that Max infused new life into those lethargic garrisons along the Canal, and, with forces from the United States, devised and led as brilliantly executed a coup de main as there is to be found in all of military history. He once remarked to me that, in the end game, he would probably be remembered for what happened in Panama. [One does not lightly disagree with a member of the Church Triumphant, but I think he is wrong.]

In the late 80s, when Maxwell Thurman was commander of TRADOC, he sensed that Army schools were deviating from the objectives of TRADOC's founders. He was able to take them back to basics: able to revive, in the training of noncommissioned and commissioned officers, performance to standards, to drive their course-work out of the classrooms, where the instructor taught better, into the field, where the students learned better; able to develop new thrusts in doctrine, and to exploit new media to build consensus on how to fight; able to re-focus the Combat Training Centers on discerning long term trends in tactical proficiency with weapon systems, and in ameliorating same with training development. Max Thurman, who had been in on TRADOC's beginnings, understood how it should work, and was therefore well positioned to guide it deftly toward its future.

In the mid 80s, when the Army encountered trouble fielding its major new weapon systems, Max Thurman, then the Vice Chief of Staff, inaugurated the "functional area analyses" among the major commands and Army staff directorates to identify and to resolve problems before they materialized in troop units. Moreover, he was a central figure in restoring light infantry to a prideful place among the Army's combat arms, and in reforming its structure and training.

In the early 80s, embarrassing discontinuities developed in the Army's system for manning its combat divisions, particularly with NCOs. Max Thurman, then Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, moved vigorously to

realign that system, career field by career field, stabilizing assignments, improving training and boosting re-enlistment among NCOs, and thereby raising troop morale, and aiding Army family welfare.

When in the late 70s, Army recruiting - and the All-Volunteer force-seemed doomed to failure, Max Thurman took charge, taught the Recruiting Command how to lift itself by its bootstraps, and showed the entire Army how to "Be All That You Can Be."

Here lies, for all his prowess with the Army's personnel system and with high command, a combat soldier's combat soldier, an artilleryman dedicated to delivering fires to assure the infantry's success. He articulated his command philosophy very precisely: "technical competence leads to tactical competence." He put little faith in lectures as a way of teaching competence, believing that soldiers learned by doing. He often said: Quote I am a great believer that if you run the play often enough, then you can develop options on the floor. But if you don't run the play at all, then nobody knows what the options are going to be, not even yourself. It is important to get people to go out in the field, to be on their own...Unquote

When he was in command of the 82d Division Artillery, he directed that all his leaders would take the Gunner's Test; when one battery commander objected, Max told him that he could refuse to take the test, but that he'd turn over command of his battery the following day. He frequently related how General Jack Vessey had won his Distinguished Service Cross as a battalion commander as gunner on a 105mm howitzer shooting direct fire beehive rounds into advancing enemy infantry. When Max was the commander of TRADOC, he discovered that many soldiers who had earned certification in a TRADOC course as "Master Gunner" for a tank or a Bradley Fighting Vehicle had never qualified by actually shooting; thereafter, Master Gunners practiced what they taught. Similarly, he demanded that Army aviators earn certification as Instructor Pilots, and that students in infantry noncommissioned officer classes qualify as experts on the rifle.

Here lies a determined man. Once Max Thurman adopted a cause, he did not rest until he had won. His father had been a lumber vendor, a master traveling salesman, who taught his son to persevere. Max was fond of telling of his father's going into the outer office of the purchasing agent of the Thomasville Chair Company on a Monday morning at 7 o'clock, and sitting there until Friday at 3 o'clock, when finally the official came out and remarked, "You're persistent, aren't you." Mr. Thurman replied, "Yes, I'm persistent. And I'm going to sell you a bunch of lumber." He did just that, a million dollars worth, the largest order in the history of lumber business in High Point, North Carolina. Max often

remarked, telling that story, that persistence pays, and that persistence was one of his own long suits. He also said that he had a good role model in his father, who truly knew how to stroke a customer.

Here lies a general who was a consummate salesman, for the Army, for his causes. I believe that his characteristic self-deprecation was one way he stroked his customer. He said that, in dealing with an institution of the size of the U.S. Army, there are only a few people with great vision, and then there are some people who sweep up after the pachyderms. I am quoting Max in what follows: Quote I am one of the [sweepers]. I think I know the Army well enough to make it dance. I know how to make it turn on, do good work, and excel in every way. That is my forte. I know there is an internal marketing function to be done as to the why and wherefore of what we do. There is an external marketing function that persuades the Congress, and the American people as well, that we know what we are doing. I don't look at myself as being an innovator, but more of a 'make it happen guy'....if you give me something that you want to get done, I'll make it happen institutionally.Unquote

Now I happen to believe, quite to the contrary, that Max Thurman was a master innovator. Particularly for a general, choosing what trend to reinforce, or what program to push is a more important form of innovation than initiating either. Max Thurman has the rare gift of vision as well as persuasiveness, and I doubt if any of the scientists or engineers who served with him in recent years on the Defense Science Board perceived him as a mere sweeper. He was more than a mover and shaker: he could see the Army's future with a clarity few possess, and discern better than anyone else what path the Army should follow to reach its potential.

Let me offer two examples: First, as VCSA, as Commander TRADOC, and in recent years, with the Defense Science Board, he championed Distributed Interactive Simulation in all three of its forms, and continued his advocacy of it up until his last trip to Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Soldiers of the future will owe much to Max Thurman for his persistence. Second, Max Thurman knew the Army Medical Department better than most line officers. He respected it, lauded it, defended it in his speeches and writings. He who of all here present had more reason to support its pursuit of excellence in clinical medicine reminded it often that its first and overarching mission was combat casualty care, and urged it to master telemedicine -- to become preeminent in the world in telemedicine-- as a way to improve its casualty care system. Future generations of soldiers will owe him for that solicitude as well.

Here lies a truly caring officer. He led the way in bringing women into the Army, and in assuring their proper training and personnel management. He was always a staunch advocate for the Army family, and for the

communities on and around Army posts. When he was commanding the 82d Division Artillery, the division commander, General Fritz Kroesen, put him in charge of the "Pop Warner" football league, so that Max became responsible for 1600 boy players and 800 girl cheerleaders, and his artillery battalions rotated in turn through a week of marking the lines on the fields, providing officials, keeping score, and otherwise managing the program. Max watched some 32 games of football every Saturday, while his season tickets to the games of North Carolina State University, his alma mater, went unused. "All this," he said, "taught me a lesson about pulling one's weight in the community. That is an important operation for young leaders to get involved in."

Here lies a man of faith, a man whose uncompromisingly high standards were derived from his family -- from his folksy, gentlemanly father; from his feisty, red-haired Irish mother; from his older brother who prepared the way for Max in the Regular Army. They expected much of him: high marks in academics -- especially in mathematics -- knowledge and observance of the tenets of his religion, industriousness, self-reliance. Maxwell delivered in all respects.

Of his elder brother, Roy, Max used to note that Roy was graduated from high school when Max was only nine years old, and that he doesn't remember much of Roy from his early years, aside from an occasional punching out, and the time he cut his leg open when Roy pushed him off the big granite block at the Post Office. Roy had been a successful student and athlete, and his impress on the town had been such that Max found himself referred to as "Roy" during his high school days. Although Max might have followed Roy to West Point, he chose to become a fraternity guy and ROTC cadet at North Carolina State, carrying a double major, and destined, despite some difficulty with organic chemistry, for a career in chemical engineering.

Graduated toward the end of the Korean War, Max, now a Reserve Second Lieutenant, was called to active duty, and assigned to the Ordnance Corps at Aberdeen, MD. Appalled at the paperwork that seemed the center of an Ordnance officer's life, Max then exercised his option as a Distinguished Military Graduate, and applied for a vacancy in the artillery. At first the Army balked, but Roy was instrumental in getting the Adjutant General to reverse the decision, and Max was launched into the gunner's trade. Arriving at Fort Sill, Max discovered that a significant number of the faculty knew who he was before he walked through the door. His gunnery instructor and his tactics instructor had been classmates of Roy at West Point, and many others on the faculty had been in airborne units with Roy in Asia. As Max put it, quote the fraternity began to take shape unquote. He had found a warm and hospitable venue, a quote paternalistic feeling that is set into place at Sill...rubbing elbows with a guy 5, 6,

7, or 8 years your senior who really took an interest in what you were doing...I was going to be in the Airborne. Here is where the role model of my brother began to loom up...unquote Thereafter, the Thurman brothers became professional associates, close friends, and eventually, as Max himself put it, quote family.unquote For all here present, I express gratitude for having known Max. For them, I tender our deepest sympathy to his family.