



# NCO's Continued Service 'More Than Just an Inspiration'

*By Carrie E. David*

SMDC/ARSTRAT

**R**EDSTONE ARSENAL, Ala. — Every American Soldier is familiar with and strives to live by the seven Army values, but for one U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command/Army Forces Strategic Command Soldier, despite receiving a life-changing diagnosis in 2013, he continues to serve and to live by them all: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage.

Staff Sgt. David L. Thomas, noncommissioned officer in charge, S-2, 1st Space Battalion, was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer that metastasized to the brain in April 2013, but has chosen to continue his service.

"I was given a prognosis of six to 18 months survival rate," Thomas said. "What I was most disappointed about at that moment was the fact that I was selling Bethe (his wife) and our children short. Second was the fact that I would no longer be here serving in the U.S. Army doing what was the most important thing: overseeing the safety of my family and our great country via my service."

Thomas enlisted two weeks after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, in the Delayed Entry Program until the opening date for training of his military occupational specialty. Upon enlisting, he intended to be a career service member.

“Joining the Army was something that was always on my mind since I was a child,” Thomas said. “The attacks made up my mind for me. Defending my family and America itself was no longer an option, but rather a duty. There was no time left to ponder; it was a matter of how fast I could sign up.”

Six days before his 35th birthday, Thomas reported for Basic Combat Training at Fort Benning, Ga. His wife, Elizabeth, had just recently begun law school, but despite the hardships, the couple decided this is what he had to do.

In March 2004, Thomas deployed to Iraq for the first time. After 13 months in Baghdad and a few months at home, he deployed again in September 2005, back to Baghdad. He returned home in January 2007, reclassified his job specialty, and in December 2008 deployed to Northern Iraq, first to Kirkuk and then to Mosul. He returned home in September 2009 and began preparing for his next deployment, this time to Kandahar, Afghanistan, in May 2011. It was during this fourth deployment that he began to notice a prevalent and chronic cough. He returned from this deployment in May 2012, and in October 2012, Thomas transferred to the 1st Space Battalion headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colo.

“I saw a doctor in January 2013, and was told I had an upper respiratory infection or the flu,” Thomas said. “I did not receive any diagnostic testing such as a chest X-ray or lung function test. I was given an antibiotic and sent on my way.”

Elizabeth had begun insisting that he go to the doctor because of the chronic cough, and finally on April 19, Thomas decided to seek medical advice.

“My wife and I were in bed watching TV when I had an episode of chest pain. I thought I had a mild heart attack,” Thomas said. “The next morning I went to the emergency room since sick call could not see me for chest pain.”

After diagnostic testing, Thomas was informed that he had a nodule in his medial left lobe, and additional doctor visits and testing were conducted.

“It was the day after my 46th birthday that I was diagnosed,” Thomas said. “I also learned that I had actually had lung cancer for more than two years, including during my last deployment to Afghanistan.”

Elizabeth said her initial reaction was shock.

“I remember thinking, ‘I can’t believe I’m hearing these words,’ she said. “I felt cheated. This was the first time in a while we were going to have uninterrupted family time free from deployment. I thought we were going to have all of this time together.”

Thomas began treatment in May 2013.

“I determined to fight cancer and have been undergoing chemotherapy,” Thomas said. “I have also undergone two cyberknife procedures to my brain for tumors and a week of radiation to my chest.”

Through it all, Thomas has continued moving forward in his Army career, earning badges and awards for excellence even as recently as January when he was awarded the Army Space Badge.

In addition to the Army Space Badge, Thomas has earned over the course of his 11-year career: six Army Commendation Medals, two Army Achievement Medals, three Army Good Conduct Medals, the National Defense Service Medal, Afghanistan Campaign Medal with two campaign stars, the Iraq Campaign Medal with six campaign stars, the Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal, the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, two Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Ribbons for the Warrior Leader Course and the Advanced Leader Course, the Overseas Service Ribbon with the numeral four for four deployments, Armed Forces Reserve Medal, and the NATO Medal Ribbon. Also, he was twice part of units that received Meritorious Unit Commendations.

According to Capt. Adrian Donnahoe, commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Space Battalion, Thomas’ dedication is inspiring.

“David has been so much more than just an inspiration,” Donnahoe said. “His patriotism has reminded so many of us that our jobs as Soldiers mean so much more than just ourselves. I truly wish there were more Americans who felt the way David does about the importance of serving. Through David’s fight both internally and externally without complaint, we are witness to his courage and commitment to complete the mission. I am truly a better person for serving in the same ranks with David, and I am blessed to know him and his family.”

Thomas, however, does not feel like he is doing anything extraordinary.

“Never did quitting my career in the U.S. Army cross my mind,” Thomas said. “Nor will I allow this illness to prematurely cause me to leave the Army. If it is up to me, I will be a member of the armed forces until the day I do leave this world to be with my father in heaven.

“I have made a decision that I will not let cancer change my duty to my country, family or friends,” he said. “I will fight cancer and continue to work as long as I am able. I will continue to place the mission first while acting with professionalism and continuing to mentor my NCOs and Soldiers.”

Upon learning of his cancer, Thomas began to research what could have caused it.

“I began to uncover the research and studies on Iraq Afghanistan War Lung disease, and the devastating effects of the ‘burn pits’ on service members and civilians who have served overseas,” Thomas said. “Through my research I learned that IAWL is a chronic pulmonary condition that will affect one in seven service members who have served overseas. While Veterans Affairs and the services have not officially recognized IAWL or the

effects of the burn pits, there are a lot of people suffering and awareness of IAWL needs to be brought to the public's attention.”

Thomas established the David Thomas IAWL Foundation to promote awareness of the disease.

“Eventually, through fundraising, we hope that the foundation has enough funds to provide basic testing for veterans or active duty service members who might need to determine if they have IAWL,” Thomas said. “In many ways, through my foundation, my last mission is to bring awareness to IAWL and those who are suffering.”

Elizabeth said that her husband is her hero, and not just because of his current fight.

“David kept saying, ‘I’m never going to deploy again. I need to be able to. It’s my job,’” she said. “He loves what he does. He’s always saying he wished he could do more; that what he’s done isn’t enough. He’s a hero to me. Not just that he’s kept going, but his whole Army career. Even with all of this, he doesn’t take the praise. But just by getting up every day and going to work, he shows everyone that he doesn’t quit. He always replies with, ‘Where else would I be?’” ■

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