

[John M. Thomason]

February 23, 1939.

John M. Thomason (white)

Hendersonville, N. C.

Lumberman

Douglas Carter, writer.

A GOOD TIME IN THE ARMY Original Names Changed Names

John U. Thomason John U. Tabor C9 - N.C. Box 1

A GOOD TIME IN THE ARMY

“I was in the Army 2 years,” said John M. Tabor, lumberman, “and most of that time was spent in France. Yes, I was in the front-line trenches quite a bit.”

John is 50 now, and [rotund?]. He is blond, with twinkling blue eyes, about average height, and close to 200 pounds in weight. He very seldom removes his hat, even in the house. When he is discussing something that interests him, he is forever pulling at his trousers, nervously. He never smokes unless he is excited, and then he has to borrow a cigarette which he puffs jerkily. He was born on a farm in the Piedmont section, and has always been “just a country boy.” He attended the public schools in the nearby town, and spent two years in the State agricultural and mechanical college, studying engineering. His father has always been well off, but not wealthy. Since his second year in college, John has been on his own, and has never sought financial help from any of his folks.

Library of Congress

“The job offered me after my sophomore year looked mighty good, so I took it. No, I don't regret giving up my college education. I would do the same thing again. But if I ever go back in the Army, I believe I'd rather be a buck private. They have the most fun.

“The man who gave me the job was a general building contractor, and he said he would teach me the business. We built post offices, college buildings, office buildings and various other things, all over the South. My first job was in Memphis, and then we went to Texas for several years, and by the time the war broke out I had worked in every State south of Pennsylvania.

“I was at home, between jobs, when I enlisted, and they sent us to Camp Sevier. When we got there the camp was just being established, and the only other outfit there was a nigger battalion - not soldiers, just laborers. We were quartered in tents. The colonel was an old friend of mine, and as soon as he found out I was in his outfit, I was made sergeant major. I didn't ask for the job - I didn't even want it - but I had it until my discharge.

“When you went in, you had to sign up a card telling what you could do, and all that stuff, and when they began to ship lumber to the camp to build mess halls and 3 make floors for the tents, and raise them up off the ground, they must have looked up the cards and saw that I had been in the building business. Anyhow, they asked to the colonel to send me over to issue the lumber to the different outfits. The colonel asked me if I wanted to go, and I told him I didn't mind, so I went, but he told me to be sure to look out for him and his outfit. He was tired of living in a tent, he said and wanted a little house. He thought maybe I could slip him a little, extra bit of lumber. Well, I got him enough lumber for his house, and for one of the majors, too. I picked a Sunday to issue the lumber to my outfit, because most of the officers were in town, or laying up in bed because they had been drunk the night before, and I didn't have any trouble getting that extra lumber for the colonel.

“I thought later on, though, that I had made a mistake doing it, because it looked like one thing was going to lead to another, and right on. After I got back to my outfit, I wanted to go

Library of Congress

to Columbia to see my girl, and I asked the colonel for a pass, and he said, 'John, you're so good getting things, I'll tell you what I'll do: you get me a stove like they got over at brigade headquarters, and I'll give you a damn pass.' Well, I wanted to see my girl mighty bad, but I didn't know how in hell I was going 4 to get a stove like that. You know, those big stoves were sent down there for the generals. The colonels had to put up with those little things. Well, anyhow, I looked the situation over, and saw that I couldn't steal a stove like that very well, so I just asked for it. That damn-little-old-dried-up major started to put me in the guardhouse! He told me to go back and tell my colonel so and so and so. It looked like I wasn't going to get my pass, but just as I left the warehouse I ran right into a friend, Major Miller. I didn't even know he was in the Army, and I don't guess he knew I was there either. He said, 'John, what the hell are you doing down here?' I saluted, of course, and then I grinned and told him I wanted a stove, but the major inside wouldn't give it to me. He said. "Hell! What kind of stove do you want?' I told him I wanted one of those big ones, and he called a sergeant, and said, 'Sergeant, take care of Sergeant Tabor, here, and make it snappy!' Boy! I could already see myself in Columbia! The major went on in, and this quartermaster sergeant asked me what I wanted, and it just dawned on me that the major hadn't specified anything to him; so, by thunder, I told him that I wanted three of those big stoves and two dozen blankets! He said, 'Well, get your 5 wagons. You can load 'em right down there at the end of the platform.' I had to give the drivers some of the blankets, but I threw the rest of them off at my tent, and then I dashed in to see the colonel, and said, 'Your stoves are outside. Where in the hell is my pass?' I don't believe I even saluted, but I took off for Columbia that afternoon! I spent seven days there with my girl, bless her heart! The colonel gave the other stoves to two of his majors."

Later, John was sent to Texas to take a training course, the idea being to make a bayonet instructor of him. He took the course, but he never instructed anybody, because he was ordered to France. On the train he met a man from his county, and they got very friendly. They had been "detached" from their regular outfits, and were traveling under special orders. Their route took them through their home county, and they were able to stop off for

Library of Congress

a day. John took one of the Negro (he always says “nigger”) boys from his father's farm along with him when he resumed his trip to New York. The boy took care of John's and his friends friend's baggage, and functioned generally as a bodyservant. In New York he bought their whisky for them - it was not sold to men in uniform - until someone learned that he was buying it for soldiers, and threatened to put him in jail. After that, they sent telegraph messengers for whatever 6 they wanted. They had orders to sail on the same ship, and they tried to get the Negro boy aboard, but it wouldn't work. They left him in New York with enough money to get home [?] .

It was a British ship, the Miltiades, and there were nearly 2,000 men aboard. The bar was open the first day out, and “nearly everybody got drunk”, but the commanding officer had the captain close the bar the next day. However, John's stateroom was close to that of the bartender, and they got acquainted. They were in second class, as were a great many of the noncommissioned officers of the unit which occupied most of the ship. John got in touch with some of them, they pooled their resources, bribed the bartender, and had whisky all the way across. They had to keep their supply carefully hidden, however, because some of the officers got word of it, wanted some themselves, could not get any, and had the ship searched repeatedly, without success.

“One day I was in the Y.M.C.A. reading room,” said John, “when there was a big explosion, and the whole bottom fell out of the boat, it felt like. It was a submarine attack, they said later, but at the time I couldn't think of anything except my life preserver. There were all sorts of tales told about it, but there was no damage. I doubt if anybody knows just what was what, but the explosion, or 7 jar, or whatever it was I felt, was probably a depth bomb.” John pronounces it “boom”. “The subchasers in our convoy were cutting all sorts of capers, and churning up the water for miles around. But I'm getting ahead of myself: The English had been feeding the boys goat, and not much else, and they were getting tired of it.” It was probably lamb, but John insists vehemently that it was goat. “On my way to the boat deck, after getting my life preserver, I came across one of the English sailors, stopped him, and asked him what was going on. He didn't know, but he said, 'This is my

Library of Congress

16th trip across, and the Canadians always got down on their knees and prayed, but those bloody Yanks out there are shouting, "Let 'er sink, damn 'er, let 'er sink." John's quotation of the sailor was given in a quavering voice, with elaborate gestures, and was followed by loud gauffaws and much leg slapping. He enjoys telling it.

John landed in England, went immediately to France, and was sent at once to the front line as an observer with the British troops. "I didn't have a damn thing to do, only see what was going on. I was supposed to get the hang of the thing, so I could tell my outfit what to expect when they got there. It was all right, but sometimes I couldn't get enough to eat. They only sent up enough food for their 8 own men, usually, and I just had to scratch around and get what I could. I never had to go hungry, but there were times I could have eaten more. Then I was transferred to the French Army. I couldn't even talk to them, but they always had some wine, and sometimes cognac. I was all up and down the fighting line before my outfit got across, and when I joined up with them again I was an old-timer. Those birds would sit around with their jaws down six inches when I told them what I'd seen. Half of 'em wouldn't believe it, and maybe I did stretch it a little, but it didn't do any harm. I was in most all of the big battles fought by my division, and I was right there when we broke the Hindenburg Line. Didn't get a scratch. But I got the ——— scared out of me several times, though."

"Would you be willing to go through it again?"

"Me? Oh, sure! I had a good time in the Army!"

After the Armistice he was shifted about from place to place, and saw nearly all of France. "But I/ was always the goat," he said. "They were always putting me in charge of something, and I had to stay sober. Well, most of the time I was sober. One time, though, I was put in command of a bunch of sergeants who had been to some school or other down near the Italian border. I was supposed to march them to a railhead about twelve miles away, and we were supposed to get there by dark, but after we'd gone 9 about three

Library of Congress

miles some of 'em stole some wine and some brandy, and first thing one after the other got drunk. Finally, we caught up with a band that had started out about an hour before we did. They had gotten the wine and brandy, too, and most of them were drunk. They had left the road, and were scattered around an orchard, each man playing a different tune. Three or four of them got together about that time, and started playing Dixie. I couldn't stand it any longer, so I ordered the men to fall out, and detailed a squad to go back for some more wine and brandy. I don't know where they got it, but when they got back, we all got drunk. Most of us got to the railhead the next afternoon, but some of 'em never did get there, so far as I know. I got balled out, of course, but they didn't much give a damn, anyway.

“It was May, 1919, I believe, before I was ordered home. I went to Brest, and got a ship there. This time I didn't have second class; I was right down in the bottom of the boat, and had to sleep in a hammock. The boys started a crap game as soon as we got to our places, and there I was without a dime! They were gambling all over that ship, and it made no difference how much you wanted to bet: somebody would cover it. Well, on the second day out - I was sick as hell all the first day - I met up 10 with a fellow from near home, and he had some money, so I borrowed \$5. He offered to lend me \$50 - I'll bet he had about \$500 - but I said, 'No, I'll just try this \$5, and see how I come out.' Well, I won \$32 shooting craps, and then got sick again (I decided I'd better quit with what I had). I paid back that \$5, and loaned another fellow \$5. Then the next day I got in a stud poker game, and played all the way to Charleston. I got off/ of that boat with over \$400 in my pocket!”
More guffaws.

When he was discharged, John got his old job back again, and for several years stuck to the contracting business. In one town, however, he thought he saw a good opening for a building-supply enterprise, and by that time he felt that he would like to have a business of his own, so he returned to the town at the first opportunity, and established a warehouse, supplying lumber and materials to the building trades.

Library of Congress

“After a couple of years, though, I saw there was more money in the lumber-manufacturing business than in the selling end, so I sold my place, bought a stand of timber, a sawmill, and some equipment, and began to cut and saw hardwoods. That's what I've been doing since. I got married about that time - 1925, I believe it was - and got me a permanent home. No, I don't have any children.

“My home is close to the timber supply, and I spend 11 about half of my time at home, and the other half on the job. I never have very far to go, except when I have to go out and sell some lumber. I've got two contracts now, though, that'll run me the rest of this year. One is with a firm in the North, and the other is North Carolina. I've sold most of my lumber in High Point, Thomasville, Hickory, Mebane, and / Statesville, but quite a bit has gone to the North. Right now I'm cutting timber in the Bald Mountains, near the Tennessee line. Business is coming back pretty good, and I'm going to make some money this year.”

“What about politics, John?”

“Oh, I don't fool with politics. I vote the democratic ticket, whenever I vote, but I don't fool much with it. This relief is a mess, though. ain't It? Did you ever hear that one about the WPA worker who..”