

# Wings on the Grounds

Former St. Mary's Naval Cadet remembers the drills

By Cathy Dausman



T.B. "Teeb" Thomas and wife Rudi at the St. Mary's College Navy Memorial bench honoring Preflight school cadets. Photo Andy Scheck

In a quiet grove behind St. Mary's football field is a statue dedicated to Our Lady of the Oaks. Its inscription reads in part: "in honor of the 1427 [St. Mary's College] men...who answered their country's call...in World War II." Several hundred yards away, alongside the Brother Cornelius Art Center, the "Navy Bench" invites pedestrians to pause and rest: "Reflect upon those young men who passed through St. Mary's Navy Preflight School during World War II." What follows is one man's story.



T.B. "Teeb" Thomas of Orinda has long loved to fly. But before he got off the ground, he trained as a cadet in the US Naval Preflight School at St. Mary's College.

Thomas was born and raised in South Dakota, and moved to Salinas, California his senior year of high school. He signed up as a V-5 recruit to take the Navy's basic flight training program in January, 1943 and graduated high school at age 17 in February. After a short stint at a Salinas junior college, Thomas was sent to flight prep school in San Luis Obispo. Next stop: St. Mary's College.

When Thomas arrived in March 1944, the sleepy campus with its pre-war enrollment of barely 300 was gearing up into a boomtown of 2,000 khaki-clad Navy and Marine personnel.

Thomas became a member of the 1st Platoon, 47th Battalion. He said the campus held "a few [religious] brothers, no civilians, and it was all male." Underclassmen bunked in temporary housing, while upperclassmen occupied dorms still in use today. Cadets were confined to the campus during their first six weeks. There were "no cameras, no weddings and no marriages." Staying single didn't bother most cadets, says Thomas; they were still young.

Training and discipline were the program watchwords. The workload combined academics with physical training, or PT. Cadets studied meteorology, astronomy, and math, and played football, baseball, basketball and soccer. They swam, ran track, boxed and wrestled. Military training included practicing water escapes from a mock plane cockpit, recognizing and estimating numbers of friendly and enemy aircraft, and pistol and rifle practice. Thomas recalls that he and his fellow cadets "did a lot of drilling" and studied until 10:00 p.m. Once they hiked from the campus to the top of Mt. Diablo in survival gear carrying a backpack that held "too much."

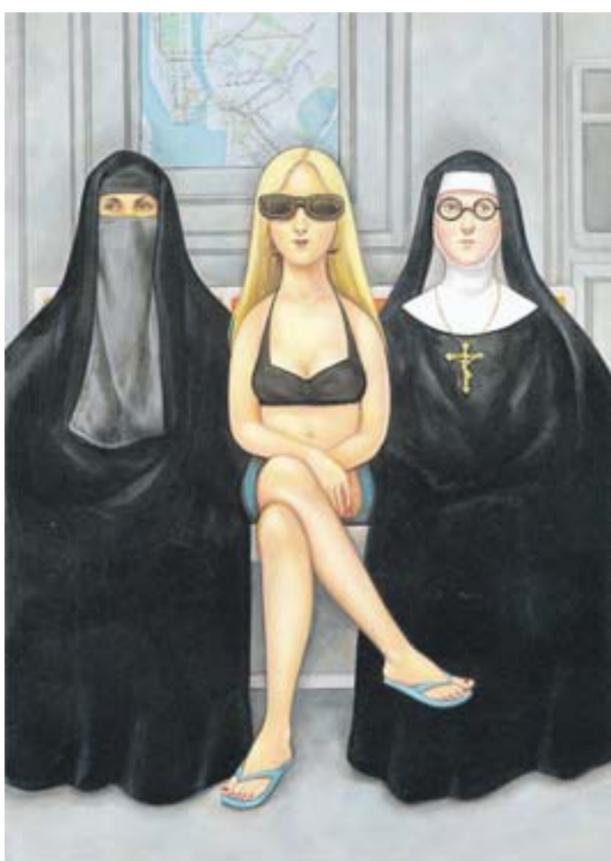
In June of 1944, with the war turning in favor of the Allied forces, officials decided to "wash out" (release) half the V-5 class. Cadets called it "the purge." "Luckily," says Thomas, "I made

it." Thomas earned his wings at Corpus Christi, Texas, after advanced flight training in a bi-wing Boeing Stearman 75 and an SBD Dauntless dive bomber. Ensign Thomas was then transferred to the Naval Air Station in Deland, Florida where he met his future wife, who was then a Navy WAVE. Thomas was discharged in December, 1945 and married in Monterey on Valentine's Day, 1946.

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