

The Dart: A tale of valor and survival

By Eve Sullivan
The Advocate

STAMFORD -- After narrowly surviving the Vietnam War, [William Thomas](#) never imagined he'd be on a battleground again.

Then, three decades later, on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, he found himself in the middle of the worst civilian attack on American soil.

"I was in the [World Financial Center](#), right next to the [World Trade Center](#)," Thomas said, recalling that fateful day. "When the first plane hit, I was on the 22nd floor and the window bent in."

Thomas said he thought a helicopter had crashed into the World Trade Center, then learned it was a plane. He and his co-workers went outside, into a courtyard that adjoined his building with the Twin Towers.

"We watched people jumping out of the building for 20 to 30 minutes, which was a big mistake," Thomas said, not knowing at the time how the experience would affect him.

Realizing he had to leave the area, Thomas started walking uptown to get back to his home in Darien. As the city was shutting down, he and some co-workers bribed a limousine driver, who took them through Harlem and Westchester County and into Connecticut.

"And then I got home," Thomas said. "I was very glad to see my family."

Thomas had escaped death once again, but not without consequence. Following the war, he had been diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder and the disturbing events of 9/11 brought it back.

Thomas never returned to his finance job in the city and soon found his marriage crumbling. He subsequently divorced, moved to Pennsylvania and lived in seclusion for about eight years.

Recently, Thomas returned to Fairfield County to spend time with his family, and now resides at Atria Stamford, an assisted living facility on Third Street, where he feels more comfortable. At 64, he's much younger than the typical resident in the building, where his neighbors mostly need help with the usual effects of aging that make living independently difficult. Thomas' needs are different.

"He's a veteran and he's been through hell," explained [Frank Mastrone](#), engage life director at the facility.

But Thomas stays active there, helping to run the sweet shop, Mastrone said. Sitting in his small, uncluttered room, Thomas agreed to tell his life story.

He was raised in Brooklyn, quit high school, went to work for a steel company and enlisted in the [U.S. Navy](#). "I followed the war very closely when I was young and personally I thought it was the right thing to do," he said.

He went through boot camp in California before shipping out to Vietnam, attending gunnery, boat handling and survival schools, where he was taught how to be a prisoner of war.

He said they were put in different environments, such as the mountains or a beach, and ate rats to survive.

In Vietnam, Thomas served on an assault patrol boat, where he was a gunner and took part in direct combat.

"I never hit land," he said, explaining that the combat missions he participated in were entirely water-based. "You had supply ships and then you went back on the river."

Thomas' unit suffered incredibly high numbers of casualties, with only 11 men out of 77 surviving. He described the experience as "horrific," saying they got into firefights and had missiles launched at them.

During one fight, he was putting a tourniquet on the boat captain's leg while the enemy was firing at them. He got shrapnel in his face and hands.

"That's how I got injured," he said. "I was unarmed at the time."

Thomas received a Purple Heart, Navy Achievement Medal with Combat V, several other medals and a citation, which he keeps in a glass case, hidden away in a closet.

The citation says he engaged in Riverine Assault Operations against the Viet Cong communist aggressors in Vietnam. From May 1968 to February 1969, it says Seaman Thomas operated a 40-mm gun on board [Command and Communications Boat](#) 91-1, a unit of the River Assault Squadron NINE, engaged in support operations with elements of the Second Brigade, Ninth Infantry Division, [U.S. Army](#).

Thomas participated in numerous combat missions, the citation reads, "which struck deep into the enemy-infested waters of the Mekong Delta and inflicted heavy losses to the enemy. In each instance, he reacted quickly and courageously."

The years that Thomas was in Vietnam, 1968-69, were among the most deadly time of the war, when the President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) dramatically ramped up the

numbers of servicemen and women drafted into the war. In all, a reported 58,220 U.S. service members were killed, more than 150,000 were wounded and 21,000 were permanently disabled.

About 830,000, including Thomas, suffered PTSD, a term coined in the 1970s after anti-Vietnam War activists saw so many Vietnam vets come home traumatized by the effects of a war a good portion of the country did not support.

Thomas said that for him, PTSD includes constant thoughts and dreams about his military service.

"It's always on my mind," Thomas said. "There's not a day that goes by that I don't have that incident on my mind -- being wounded."

Thomas said he saw a lot of friends killed, but can't remember all of their names. He said he survived by having a sense of humor and a certain mindset.

"The key to survival over there is, it's just a knowledge you acquire," he said. "You have a sense you're already dead and then you're able to survive."

Upon returning home, a therapist told Thomas to focus on his life and that's what he did -- enrolling in college, tutoring other students and getting a job on Wall Street. He was working at Merrill Lynch at the time of the attack.

While describing his journey, Thomas, ever the survivor, laughs and keeps a positive attitude.

"I never regretted it once," he said. "I don't regret it today. It made an 18-year-old grow up fast."