

= William Thompson (Medal of Honor , 1950) =

William Henry Thompson (16 August 1927 ? 6 August 1950) was a United States Army soldier and a recipient of the United States military 's highest decoration , the Medal of Honor , for his actions in the Korean War .

Born to a single mother in an impoverished neighborhood in New York City , Thompson entered the Army in 1945 and served tours in Alaska and Japan . At the outbreak of the Korean War , Thompson was a machine gunner of the U.S. 24th Infantry Regiment , a de facto segregated unit .

During the Battle of Masan in August 1950 , Thompson was part of a unit conducting an offensive along the Pusan Perimeter . When North Korean troops attacked his company and caused many men to panic and scatter , Thompson stood his ground , refusing orders to evacuate despite being wounded , and covering the retreat of his platoon until he was killed by a grenade . For his actions , Thompson was awarded the Medal of Honor , one of only two African Americans to be so honored in the war .

= = Biography = =

William Thompson was born on 16 August 1927 in Brooklyn , New York to an unmarried mother . Little is known of Thompson 's early life , but he grew up in an impoverished tenement house neighborhood . He dropped out of school at a young age , and spent his teen years wandering the streets . A local minister noticed Thompson sleeping in a park one evening and took him to a homeless shelter , the New York Home for Homeless Boys . Thompson remained a resident there until he turned 18 in 1945 .

Some sources alternatively state Thompson decided to join the United States Army as an opportunity to escape poverty , or that he was drafted .

= = = Military career = = =

Thompson enlisted in the army in October 1945 , and after basic combat training was assigned to a post in Adak , Alaska . After 18 months , he was honorably discharged from the military , but found adjustment to civilian life difficult and opted to return to the military . In January 1948 , Thompson reenlisted and was assigned to the U.S. 6th Infantry Division , which was on occupation duty in South Korea . When the 6th Infantry Division returned to the United States , he was reassigned to the U.S. 24th Infantry Regiment , U.S. 25th Infantry Division which was assigned to the post @-@ World War II occupation of Japan . His Military Occupational Specialty was 4812 , that of a heavy weapons infantryman who operated automatic weapons .

The 24th Infantry was a de facto segregated unit , but Thompson nonetheless enjoyed his time in the military . Described as " thin , hollow @-@ eyed and quiet , " he had enjoyed military life , viewing it as one of few places where an African American could enjoy some degree of comfort . He was a very effective soldier , consistently maintaining his uniform and equipment and keeping his firearms extremely clean . Thompson was also a skilled marksman and rarely had behavioral problems . He was content in the lower ranks of the military , preferring to follow orders instead of giving them .

At the outbreak of the Korean War , Thompson was a private first class , part of M Company of 3rd Battalion , 24th Infantry , the heavy weapons support company for the battalion .

The 24th Infantry first came into heavy contact with North Korean People 's Army troops on 22 July during the battle of Sangju . North Korean rifle fire came in on the dispersed regiment , and its troops almost immediately began retreating from the front , ignoring officers ' commands to stay in position . Historians blame the retreat as much on officers ' ineptitude as on the panicking of individual soldiers . The tendency to panic continued in nearly all the 24th Infantry operations west of Sangju . Men left their positions and straggled to the rear , abandoning weapons . On many occasions , units lost most of their equipment while on the move , even when not under fire , causing logistical shortages . In other cases , the majority of a unit deserted its position at the first

sign of North Korean fire . The situation became so dire that the regiment 's senior officers set up a checkpoint west of the town and stopped every vehicle coming from the west , removing stragglers attempting to retreat . Many jeeps were filled with six or seven men claiming they were retreating after their position was overrun . The 24th quickly gained a poor reputation as a " bug out " unit , blasted for its poor performance during combat . Historians contend its accomplishments , particularly at the Battle of Yechon , were ignored , while shortcomings were seized upon to depict the 24th as a sub @-@ par unit , and African @-@ Americans as inferior soldiers to whites .

= = = Medal of Honor action = = =

On 6 August 1950 , as the Battle of Pusan Perimeter was beginning , the 25th Infantry Division was engaged in a counteroffensive near Masan , during the Battle of Masan . That night , M Company was supporting the division 's advance near the city of Haman , South Korea , in a mountain valley south of Sobuk @-@ san . As Thompson 's platoon approached the town , it was ambushed by a large force of North Korean People 's Army troops . Automatic weapons fire caused several men in the company to panic and flee . Those remaining were ordered into a tight perimeter by Second Lieutenant Herbert H. Wilson .

After a North Korean grenade knocked out the only other remaining heavy weapons specialist , Thompson manned the last heavy weapon in the platoon : his .30 caliber M1917 Browning machine gun . Thompson soon became the focus of the North Korean fire . During this period , Thompson was wounded several times by small arms fire and grenade fragments , but ignored his injuries and did not inform the rest of his unit . After the platoon was ordered to withdraw , Wilson ordered it to higher ground .

Crawling to Thompson 's position , Wilson discovered his injuries . Wilson ordered Thompson to withdraw twice , but the latter refused to obey and continued to fire on the advancing North Koreans . Thompson told Wilson he was dying and was not going to move back . Wilson then called forward two non @-@ commissioned officers , who unsuccessfully attempted to remove Thompson from the gun physically . Thompson told them , " Get out of here , I 'll cover you ! " Wilson reluctantly ordered the remaining men to pull back . As the platoon retreated , they heard grenade blasts around Thompson 's position , followed by a larger blast , at which point his gun fell silent . He had continued to fire his machine gun until he was killed .

A few days later , when M Company retook the area , they discovered Thompson had made a last stand and killed a large number of North Koreans before dying . He had prevented higher casualties in his unit as it withdrew .

= = = Subsequent recognition = = =

Thompson 's actions were initially overlooked by division commanders , who instead focused on the poor performance of the 24th Infantry Regiment , whose soldiers panicked and fled from combat . Thompson 's battalion commander , Lieutenant Colonel Melvin Blair , initially refused to submit a recommendation , until 4 January 1951 , five months after the action . Thompson initially received a Silver Star Medal for the action , but after Blair changed his mind he began pushing the paperwork through , personally locating the witnesses who could attest to Thompson 's valor . Blair hoped Thompson 's recognition would improve other commanders ' views on the 24th Infantry Regiment . Eventually , though , that unit was disbanded and its personnel integrated into other units .

On 21 June 1951 , General of the Army Omar Bradley presented Thompson 's mother with the Medal of Honor , posthumously recognizing Thompson 's actions .

= = Awards and decorations = =

Thompson 's awards and decorations include :

= = = Medal of Honor citation = = =

Thompson was the first of two African Americans to be awarded the Medal of Honor in Korea , the other being Cornelius H. Charlton in June 1951 . Charlton was also a member of the 24th Infantry who was recognized posthumously . Other African Americans who fought in Korea are known to have been nominated for the medal but did not receive it . They were the first two African Americans to be nominated for the Medal of Honor since the Spanish ? American War , though several World War II veterans were later nominated . The two nominations had seen delays because unit commanders refused to submit their nominations . In all , 131 people were awarded the medal during and in the immediate aftermath of the war .

Pfc. Thompson distinguished himself by conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty in action against the enemy . While his platoon was reorganizing under cover of darkness , fanatical enemy forces in overwhelming strength launched a surprise attack on the unit . Pfc. Thompson set up his machine gun in the path of the onslaught and swept the enemy with withering fire , pinning them down momentarily thus permitting the remainder of his platoon to withdraw to a more tenable position . Although hit repeatedly by grenade fragments and small @-@ arms fire , he resisted all efforts of his comrades to induce him to withdraw , steadfastly remained at his machine gun and continued to deliver deadly , accurate fire until mortally wounded by an enemy grenade . Pfc. Thompson 's dauntless courage and gallant self @-@ sacrifice reflect the highest credit on himself and uphold the esteemed traditions of military service .