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**A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:**

# **LIEUTENANT GENERAL SIR T. O. THOMPSON**

A concise biography of Lieutenant General Sir Treffry Owen THOMPSON, K.C.S.I., C.B., C.B.E., D.M., D.P.H., an officer in the British Army between 1912 and 1948.  
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**A Concise Biography of Lieutenant General Sir Treffry O. THOMPSON**

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# Lieutenant General Sir Treffry Owen THOMPSON, K.C.S.I., C.B., C.B.E., D.M., D.P.H.

## Introduction

Lieutenant General Sir Treffry THOMPSON was an officer in the Royal Army Medical Corps of the British Army during the Great War and Second World War. In the former, he saw active service in France, Belgium and Italy. Between the wars, his career was centred on India.

During the Second World War, he played a key role in the defeat of the Japanese Army, by developing and delivering the improvement in hygiene and medical services that allowed the military commanders successfully to prosecute the campaigns in Burma.

## Early Life

Treffry Owen THOMPSON was born on 9 August 1888. He was educated at the Dragon School, Oxford; St John's College, Oxford; and St George's Hospital, London. He graduated with the Bachelor of Medicine degree in 1913. As a young man, THOMPSON played hockey for the Oxford Occasionals and Oxford County, and he also excelled at cricket, rugby, and tennis.

THOMPSON's army career began when he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps Special Reserve on 18 October 1912, in the rank of Lieutenant. He was granted a Regular Army commission on 30 January 1914 as a Lieutenant on probation (service number 4850), being confirmed in the rank on 26 October 1914.

## Service during the Great War

With the outbreak of the Great War, THOMPSON deployed on active service to France and Belgium, arriving there on 2 October 1914. He left France on 24 May 1915, and then served in Italy between 2 November 1917 and 4 November 1918.

He was promoted to the rank of Captain on 30 March 1915, and Acting Major between 30 July 1918 and 12 February 1919. THOMPSON was wounded during the war, and was Mentioned in Dispatches on 5 June 1919. He was awarded the Croce di Guerra by the King of Italy for his services in that country during the war.

## Between the Wars

In 1921 and 1922, THOMPSON served in Malabar, southern India. On 11 January 1926, he was appointed a Deputy Assistant Director of Hygiene (D.A.D.H) in India. He was promoted to the rank of Major with effect from 30 January 1926. THOMPSON left the role of D.A.D.H. on 11 January 1929, and in the following two years, served on the North West Frontier. Between 1 March 1933 and 14 July 1935, THOMPSON was again appointed a Deputy Assistant Director of Hygiene.

Promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel came on 27 August 1935 when THOMPSON was forty-seven years old. Just prior to his promotion, he was appointed the Assistant Director of Hygiene and Pathology in Northern Command, India. During this period, he again served on the North West Frontier in 1936 and 1937. He relinquished his post on 31 January 1938, and travelled to the United Kingdom to take up his next posting.

On his arrival, he was appointed an Assistant Director of Hygiene at the War Office on 1 March 1938. On 6 January 1939, he left the War Office and returned to India where he was appointed an Assistant Director of Hygiene and Pathology at Army Headquarters, India, on 6 April 1939.

## The Second World War

The commencement of the Second World War in Europe found THOMPSON still undertaking his role as Assistant Director of Hygiene and Pathology. He was a Lieutenant Colonel, but was promoted to the rank of Acting Colonel on 2 September 1940. Then he was promoted Temporary Colonel six months later on 2 March 1941. On 26 March 1941, he was promoted to the substantive rank of Colonel, his seniority dating from 27 August 1938.

In May 1941, THOMPSON was sent to Iraq to take the role as Deputy Director of Medical Service for the Line of Communication Area, British Forces in Iraq under Major General George BERESFORD.

On 18 January 1942, THOMPSON was promoted to the rank of Acting Brigadier and appointed the Deputy Director of Medical Services for Burma Command. He arrived in Burma from Iraq shortly after the Japanese invaded the country, and served throughout the first Burma campaign as the British and Indian forces were forced to retreat back into India. In recognition of his service in Burma, he was awarded the Commander of the Order of the British Empire (C.B.E.) on 28 October 1942 for his gallant and distinguished services between December 1941 and May 1942.

His citation read:

*For conspicuous devotion to duty energy and resource during the period 10<sup>th</sup> March to 20<sup>th</sup> March 1942, and especially during the withdrawal of the Army in Burma from the Mandalay Area to Assam.*

*Brigadier THOMPSON as D.D.M.S., was faced with the problem of evacuation of some 2,000 batch casualties and risk over the 250 miles of inhospitable country crossed only by one occasional fair weather M.T. track. Other difficulties were lack of transport; sickness amongst medical personnel; and the need to evacuate the casualties rapidly. Later practicably all medical equipment which could not be manhandled had to be abandoned on the East bank of the Chindwin. During the withdrawal the number of casualties increased through sickness.*

*Brigadier THOMPSON surmounted every difficulty by resource and improvisation and ensured by his personal example of untiring energy that all casualties were evacuated back to Assam. This entailed his constant movement day and night up and down the route; rapid decision to meet emergent problems; and conspicuous devotion to duty. During this time Brigadier THOMPSON was himself ill but refused to leave his post.'*

THOMPSON was recommended by Major General GODDARD, the Major General in charge of Administration of the Army in Burma on 16 June 1942. General ALEXANDER appended on the form: *'His work has been beyond praise'*.

On his return to India, with the disbandment of Burma Command in May 1942, THOMPSON took some time to recover from his experiences in Burma and his ill health, so did not hold his next appointment until 31 July 1942. On that date, he was promoted Acting Major General, and appointed the Deputy Director of Medical Services for the newly formed Central Command in India.

THOMPSON transferred to the role as D.D.M.S. of the Eastern Army on 5 December 1942 and then on 16 October 1943, he became the Director of Medical Services for the 11<sup>th</sup> Army Group on its formation on the same day. This Army Group was commanded by General George GIFFARD with its headquarters located at Barrackpore near Calcutta. THOMPSON had been promoted to the rank of Temporary Major General on 31 July 1943. During the period that THOMPSON was D.M.S. of the 11<sup>th</sup> Army Group, the 14<sup>th</sup> Army fought the most decisive battles of the campaign so far. These were the defence of the Arakan (including the Defence of the Admin Box); the seige of Kohima, the defence of Sangshak, the siege of Imphal; and then the offensive campaigns to retake Kohima and reopen the road to Imphal. THOMPSON oversaw the medical arrangements for all these key battles, and ensured that the troops received the best medical attention they could under the circumstances.

On 12 November 1944, the 11<sup>th</sup> Army Group became the Allied Land Forces, South East Asia, with Lieutenant General Oliver LEESE replacing General George GIFFARD. Whilst most of the senior officers of the 11<sup>th</sup> Army Group were replaced by officers new to the Far East, THOMPSON was one senior officer who continued in his role, although it was redesignated as the Director of Medical Services, Allied Land Forces South East Asia. He also became the Medical Advisor the Supreme Commander of South East Asia, Admiral Lord Louis MOUNTBATTEN.

THOMPSON was promoted to the substantive rank of Major General on 11 November 1944, and was appointed an Honorary Physician to H.M. The King on 12 December 1944. He was appointed the Director of Medical Services for South East Asia Command on 8 April 1945. As the Director of Medical Services, he visited prisoner-of-war camps in Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. He was made a Companion of the Order of the Bath (C.B.) on 1 January 1946 in the New Year's Honours List.

The pinnacle of THOMPSON's career came with his appointment as Director of Medical Services, Headquarters the Army in India at Delhi on 25 March 1946. On assuming his new role, he was promoted to the rank of Local Lieutenant General. He was in post at the time of partition on 15 August 1947 and oversaw the split of the Indian Medical Services with the creation of the independent countries of India and Pakistan. In the New Year's Honours List published on 1 January 1948, THOMPSON was knighted with his receipt of the honour of Knight Commander of the Most Exalted Order of the Star of India (K.C.S.I.). Sir Treffry THOMPSON retired from the British Army on 15 May 1948 and was granted the rank of Honorary Lieutenant General.

## Retirement and Death

On retirement, he became the commissioner to the British Red Cross in India, but later returned in the United Kingdom. Sir Treffry settled in Chulmleigh in mid-Devon, where he was the county director of the British Red Cross; being awarded the society's Special Service Cross in 1960. From 1950 to 1953, he was Colonel Commandant of the Royal Army Medical Corps. He edited the Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps and wrote the official medical history of the Second World War.

Sir Treffry THOMPSON died on 1 December 1979, aged ninety-one years. In his obituary published in the British Medical Journal, THOMPSON was described as:

*A grand and great man, never valuing his own importance and advancement, always seeking only to get on with the job, ever going to see for himself the problems presented by this most difficult area. He inspired his team with his own devotion to duty, and we all loved him.*

His legacy was his significant role in defeating the Japanese in a prolonged campaign that was as much a medical campaign as well as a military one.

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