

## American Dressage Legends: Col. Donald W. Thackeray

*From the cavalry tradition, a dressage and equestrian pioneer*

To say that Col. Donald W. Thackeray is a Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame inductee is to grossly understate his equestrian accomplishments.

Thackeray (1915-1995) was the only person ever to become an International Equestrian Federation (FEI) "O" (now 5\*) judge in four disciplines: dressage, eventing, jumping, and driving. He of-

organizations to take dressage more seriously, and also to bring European officials to judge US competitions. Undoubtedly his international world view, shaped by his military career and friendships with influential equestrians both at home and abroad, helped the cause.

Thackeray, a 1938 United States Military Academy graduate, is memorialized in a tribute article published by the West Point Association of Graduates. *USDF Connection* thanks the West Point AOG for permission to reprint the following article.

### Donald W. Thackeray 1938

*Feb 5, 1995 • Died in New Windsor, MD  
Interred in Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, VA*

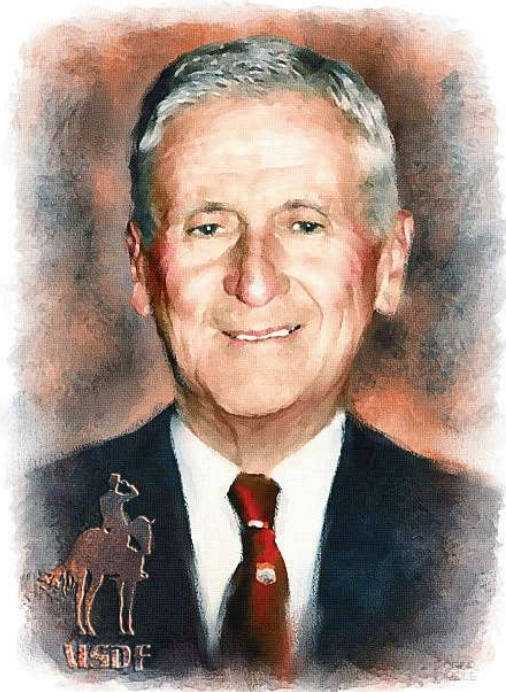
In Arlington Cemetery on 10 February 1995, the minister spoke the following words at the interment of Donald W. Thackeray: "The Colonel had the determination and discipline of a rider, the iron will of a soldier, the fairness of a judge, the wisdom of a teacher and an unwavering love for his family." Little did she know that she had captured the quiet dignity of "Thack's" 55 years of service to his comrades, his country, and the God who protected him through war and peace.

Thack was born in Wakefield, Rhode Island, on 20 May 1915, the son of Lieutenant Colonel Robert G. and Bessie Walker Thackeray. During the war years, his father served as commanding officer at Fort Adams, a coast artillery post in Newport, Rhode Island, resulting perhaps in his traditional beliefs in "the school of the horse" and the United States Cavalry. As a boy, Thack was often seen in the stables with the soldiers or riding the

Army mules. As a young man, racing sailboats on Salt Pond probably influenced his decision to take the Navy cruise as a second classman instead of the more conventional Army tour. A superb athlete, he led South Kingston High School to a state championship in basketball.

Having kept the academic department at bay with "a spirited if not masterful defense," Thack graduated with a significant list of accomplishments. He diligently learned the arts of riding, fencing, and gunnery and how to scale a fortress. While proceeding through the grades to cadet lieutenant, he earned numerals in tennis, fencing and sabre. As captain of the fencing team, he earned a minor "A" for three consecutive years and became an intercollegiate sabre champion in 1937 by winning the coveted Sands Trophy. He was especially successful at developing his equestrian skills and affinity for horses under the skillful coaching of Colonel A. A. (Hank) Frierson.

Thack's initial assignment was to the 11th Cavalry as a troop officer. The 11th was still a horse outfit and, for two years, would provide some of the most enjoyable service of his life. In 1939, he married Virginia "Jinny" Becker, a horsewoman in her own right and a frequent visitor at West Point. After becoming troop commander, they left California to join the Reconnaissance Troop, 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Fort Custer, Michigan. At Fort Custer, he served as Cavalry Troop and Reconnaissance Squadron commander and stayed with the 5th all the way through Iceland, England, Ireland, France, Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia as Recon Squadron commander and division staff officer. After returning home, Thack



MILITARY AND EQUESTRIAN LEADER:  
*Col. Donald W. Thackeray's USDF Hall of Fame portrait*

ficiated at five Olympic Games and two Pan American Games, and he served as a director of the FEI, the American Horse Shows Association (now United States Equestrian Federation), and the United States Equestrian Team (now USET Foundation).

In his directorial roles, Thackeray was able to persuade the various

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served as advisor to one of the last horse units in the Army, Squadron "A," New York National Guard. Here he enjoyed associating with the last vestige of the cavalry tradition and playing polo. This was followed by two years at Fort Knox with the Armored School and as a battalion commander, 3d Armored Division, before heading for Korea. He spent one year in Korea as G-2, IXth Corps and then returned to the 3d Armored Division, Fort Hood, Texas, as battalion and Combat Command "B" commander. After completing the Air War College, he spent three years as O-2, First Army. In 1958 he was selected to be military attaché in Vienna, Austria. While in Vienna, he befriended Colonel Alois Podhajsky, director of the Spanish Riding School, and Prince Phillip of England.

Upon return to the US, Thack completed a tour in the Pentagon with DIA and again was selected to serve as defense attaché in Bern, Switzerland. Returning to the US, he retired to his farm in western Maryland with a new dual career with the Maryland Department of Transportation and as an international equestrian administrator and judge. Jinny and Thack also raised and trained horses in their spare time.

Thack's family legacy encompassed his partner in life for 56 years—Jinny—one daughter, one son, and four grandchildren. His daughter Wick inherited his affinity for horses and equestrian competition. She is presently a trainer and horse breeder in Pennsylvania. His daughter Virginia carries on the equestrian family tradition in New Jersey. Grandson Erik, a recent graduate of Florida Institute of Technology, aspires to be an airline pilot.

Thack's son Buck is pursuing a career in the National Park Service as a park manager and recently retired from the Army Reserve. His daughter Ashley, a graduate of the University of Texas, is a mortgage broker in Naples, Florida. Thack's youngest grandson, Jason, is studying to be a physician at

the University of Florida. At Thack's request, Buck's wife, Jan, a minister, presided over his funeral.

Thack was one of a select few military men who shaped American and international equestrian sports after World War II. Capitalizing on opportunities afforded while serving as military attaché in Austria and Switzerland, he joined the elite network of equestrian athletes, officials and administrators. His first horse-show judging assignment was the jumping competition at New York's National Horse Show while he was still on active duty with Squadron "A." In 1972, he was a show-jumping judge at the Munich Olympics and, shortly thereafter, became an international dressage judge. Since then, he judged the Olympic Games at Montreal (1976), Los Angeles (1984), and Seoul (1988). [Editor's note: Col. Thackeray also judged the dressage competition at the 1980 alternate Olympics in Goodwood, England.] Competitive driving of horse-drawn carriages was another of his interests in "retirement." He helped draft rules for combined driving and officiated in scores of international events, such as the Pan American Games and World Championships in Barcelona, Spain. In 1987, he stepped down as chairman of the *Fédération Equestre Internationale's* (FEI) Driving Committee after 10 years and the FEI's main policy-making body after 17 years. He also found time to serve the United States Equestrian Team in many official and administrative roles, with the most recent being vice president for driving. Recognition as Maryland's "Horseman of the Year" in 1994 is typical evidence of his position in the equestrian community.

Undoubtedly, a majority of the riders in this country have had the honor to have been judged by Thack. The man who judged at the Olympics, Pan American Games, and many World Championships could often be seen in a dusty, impromptu dressage ring, having judged every novice and amateur, every rising star, with the same concentration and respect he showed for elite riders at in-



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ternational competitions. Thack was the only person in the world to have attained official FEI judge status in four disciplines: dressage, driving, show jumping, and three-day eventing; yet he was always positive and encouraging toward every competitor no matter the level or polish.

One theme is clear after listening to many who associated with Thack during his 79 years: He selflessly served others in a quiet competent manner that will be remembered. In a letter to the editor of *The Chronicle of the Horse*, Captain Lorelei Wilson Coplan, coach of the USMA Equestrian Team, stated, "In his honor, we are establishing a perpetual memorial trophy to be awarded to the most improved underclass rider. This is in keeping, we believe, with the many sentiments expressed here about Colonel Thackeray's promotion of struggling new enterprises, organizations, and individuals throughout his life." She went on to reveal that while visiting the Class of 1938 Memorial Wall overlooking the Hudson River with him, he read the names of fallen comrades and had a story about each. Not surprisingly, he could also remember which ones were "real horsemen" and which were not!

In 1909, G. K. Chesterton wrote, "Soldiers have many faults, but they have one redeeming merit: they are never worshipers of force. Soldiers more than any other men are taught severely and systematically that might is not right. The fact is obvious. The might is in the hundred men who obey, the right (or what is held to be right) is in the one man who commands them." Thack was the epitome of this humble notion.

Thack once said, "Son, real soldiers qualify with the pistol by riding perpendicular to the target at a full gallop and place all rounds in the #10 ring." "Airborne Sir!" I said. "We'll talk about it someday on Fiddler's Green." We all love you, Sir.

—The Thackeray Family

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