

**REMEMBERING ONE OF OUR GREATEST HEROES
THOMAS DRY HOWIE CITADEL CLASS OF 1929,
“THE MAJOR OF ST LO”**

Robert C. Mebane, Citadel Class of 1980



One of the most prominent landmarks on The Citadel campus is the Major Thomas Dry Howie Bell Tower next to the chapel which honors one of our most famous alumni, immortalized as “the Major of St Lo” for his exploits in combat during the Normandy Campaign in World War II. However, few know the details of his life and military service or of the many honors he has received up until the recent past; on this 65th anniversary year of his death and the D-Day invasion it is fitting to look back and appreciate all he did and all he stood for.



Howie was born on April 12, 1908 in Abbeville, South Carolina; he was one of 7 children in the family of a man of Scottish descent, Torrance Howie and his wife Cora Dry. He graduated from Abbeville High School in 1925 where he was an outstanding student and star athlete; at The Citadel he was a deans list English major and all state halfback on the football team who also played baseball and boxed. His strong principles and leadership qualities became evident during his

junior year in 1928 when he led a hunger strike to bring attention to the poor quality of the food in the mess hall; he also became known as a cadet who was a friend to everyone and a man of exemplary discipline and morals, qualities that resulted in his classmates voting him President of the Senior Class and naming him as the “most versatile, popular and best all around”

A great story that combines his academic, athletic and personal excellence occurred in November, 1928 when The Citadel was to play Clemson in its homecoming game. Already in its usual position as a heavy underdog the teams chances were further dimmed when their star offensive player, Tom Howie was scheduled to be in Columbia that day attending a Rhodes Scholarship interview (he later missed selection by one tenth of a point).

Though scheduled for 9 AM the interview was delayed for 2 hours which apparently would leave no chance for him to make it back to Charleston for the big game but miraculously the car he was riding in roared up to the stadium in a cloud of dust just as the kickoff was taking place with Howie already in uniform having changed enroute. He raced onto the field in time to carry the ball on the first offensive play, bowling over a defender and making a first down; fired up by the happy surprise of his presence and energized play the Bulldogs went on to score a stunning 12 – 7 upset victory with Howie scoring the winning touchdown.



After graduating with honors in 1929 Howie moved north to Staunton, Virginia to become an English teacher, coach and athletic director at Staunton Military Academy. He became highly popular for his calm, friendly demeanor and excellent teaching skills, his football teams would win 4 military school state championships and he coached the baseball team to many successful seasons. In 1932 he married a local girl, Elizabeth Payne; a daughter Sally was born in 1938.

With the clouds of war gathering around the world in the early 1940s Howie answered the calling of service to his country by accepting a commission in the Virginia National Guard, he was assigned as an officer with the 116th Infantry Regiment of the 29th “Blue and Gray” Division. After being called to active duty in the summer of 1941 his unit underwent

intensive combat training in Georgia, North Carolina and Florida; the 116th sailed for Europe on the liner Queen Mary in September, 1942. The 29th continued to train in England as the North African, Sicilian and Italian campaigns raged up through 1944, Howie's frustration over being left out of the action was evident in a letter he wrote to his daughter in the fall of 1943: "...Its something like football; somebody has to play the game, somebody has to beat the enemy. All my life I've tried to make the first team in everything. Sitting on the bench when game time comes is no consolation for weeks of bruising drudgery. I know. I did some bench sitting initially in everything I set my heart on. And I've been sitting on the bench and training hard for three years now. Remember what I told you: sit up straight, look people in the eye and tell the truth....."



On June 6, 1944 Tom Howie got his wish and started the final chapter of his life; now serving on the staff of the 116th Infantry he helped lead the unit ashore at Omaha Beach in the third wave of the Normandy Invasion. After breaking through from the bloody beaches his unit spent the remainder of June and much of July slogging through the

hedgerow country of western France in brutal yard by yard fighting through ditches and fields, firing frequently at pointblank range in some of the most costly fighting of the European campaign. On July 13th, Major Howie was placed in command of the 3rd Battalion of the 116th; American forces had pushed to within a mile of the town of St. Lo, a vital transportation hub near the base of the Cotentin Peninsula that Hitler had ordered be held at all costs. Howie felt his men had earned the honor of being the first unit to enter the town but on July 16th his battalion was ordered to come to the aid of the 2d Battalion of the 116th which had been surrounded near the town of La Madeleine and was almost out of food and ammunition. Driving forward through the "Martinsville Line" and overwhelming German troops that had held for days Howie's men used grenades and bayonets in sometimes hand to

hand fighting to break through in less than 2 hours to relieve their comrades.

The following day after regrouping his forces Major Howie planned to leave the 2d to defend its position and lead his battalion into St. Lo, despite counterattacks by enemy forces and constant barrages of artillery fire he urged his men to keep under cover and encouraged them by saying “We WILL get to St Lo!” He radioed the 29th Division Commander, Major General Charles Gerhardt to report on the situation and stated “the second can’t make it, they’re exhausted, they’re too cut up”, then he was heard to say “yes, we can make it....SEE YOU IN ST. LO!” He then ordered his unit forward for the push into the city, at that moment an enemy mortar barrage struck nearby; Howie remained standing to ensure that his men had taken cover, seconds later he fell fatally wounded by shrapnel. The following day as the 3d Battalion entered the city his flag draped body was placed on a stretcher and put on the hood of a jeep at the head of the column so he could be the first American to enter the city, an event remembered in one of the series of murals inside Daniel Library on The Citadel campus. As fighting raged throughout the city his men lifted his body from the jeep and ran through enemy fire to place it in the

rubble of the St Croix Cathedral and then filed by to salute and pay their respects, citizens of the town came out to lay flowers next to the stretcher. The event was witnessed by a young “Stars and Stripes” reporter, Andy Rooney; at a recent broadcast from France on the anniversary of VE day he mentioned no



military member by name except one – Major Thomas Howie. In his words: “...just in case your history books don’t mention it, let me tell you what happened July 18th, here at St. Lo,a Major named Tom Howie was the leader of the battalion that actually captured St. Lo. At least he was the leader until he was killed just outside the town.....I guess there never was an American soldier who was more honored by what the people who loved him did for him after he died.”



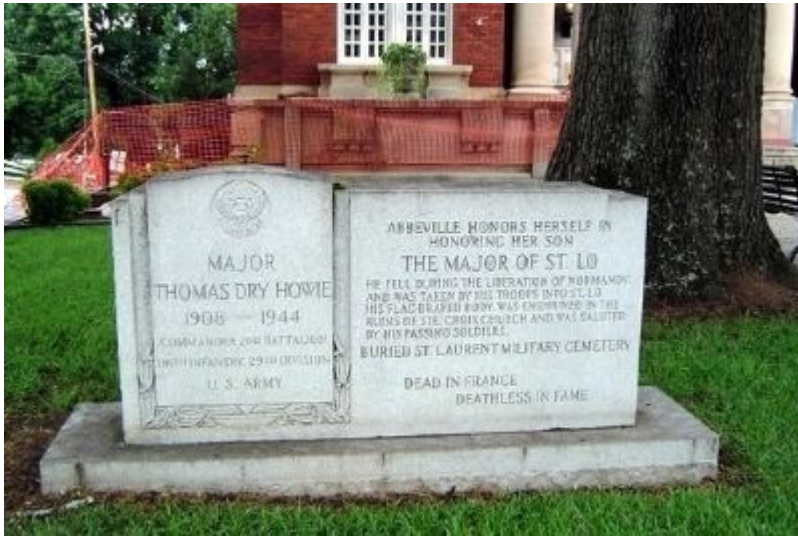
Many tributes and memorials have been made to Major Thomas Howie since his death; in March, 1945 Staunton Military Academy established the Howie Rifles, a drill team whose members were selected based on a combination of military bearing, academics, drill proficiency and leadership. In 1947 a bust of Major Howie was formally dedicated outside the administration building on campus, when the

school was closed in 1976 it was moved to a museum at the Major Thomas D. Howie Memorial National Guard Armory in Staunton; in 2007 a copy was replaced in its original location on what is now part of the campus of Mary Baldwin University. The citizens of St. Lo erected a memorial to the liberator of their city, it includes a copy of the same bust. In 1954 Howie's classmate R. Hugh Daniel and his older brother Charles '18 donated money to erect the Howie Bell Tower on The Citadel campus, it includes a carillon with one of the largest set of bells in North America, cast at the famous Royal Bergen Foundry in The Netherlands.



In 1956, Howie's story was told in an article written for *Colliers Magazine* by Cornelius Ryan, author of "The Longest Day" and "A Bridge too Far." Shortly thereafter it was repeated on TV in an episode of the show *Cavalcade of America* with Howie being portrayed by a young Peter Graves who would later become famous for his role as Jim Phelps in the "Mission: Impossible" series. Famed historian Steven Ambrose prominently mentioned the story of Major Howie in his book "Citizen Soldier" and after having served as a script consultant for the movie "Saving Private Ryan" indicated it was Howie who was the model for the character of Captain John Miller portrayed by actor Tom Hanks, Miller had the same personality traits as Howie and had also been a high school English teacher and coach before the war. The US Army Reserve Center in Greenville, SC is named in his honor; in his hometown of Abbeville, SC a historical marker stands at the family home and on the front lawn of the city courthouse opposite one to John Calhoun is a memorial to Major Howie that includes the

phrase “Dead in France, Deathless in Fame.”



In February, 2003 he was inducted into the South Carolina Hall of Fame, then Citadel President, Major General John Grinalds, USMC, described him as a man “whose life, courage and devotion to duty meet the exemplary standards that qualify him for induction.”



After his death Major Howie was posthumously awarded the Silver Star, Bronze Star, Purple Heart and French Legion of Honor.



He is buried at the St. Laurent Cemetery on the cliffs above Omaha Beach with more than 9,300 others who fell in France.

