



## Rev. Dr. Thomas H. McPhatter

Thomas Hayswood McPhatter was born October 8, 1923, in Lumberton, North Carolina, to Elizabeth Morrisey and Thomas Matthew McPhatter. Thomas was the last of 11 children, and the only boy, born to his parents in their middle age, ten years after the last daughter was born. His mother dedicated him on the altar to God after his birth and continually told him he was special and a gift from God. His parents also helped raise some of their grandchildren (all girls) as Thomas was growing up. Thomas attended Redstone Academy, a Presbyterian mission school founded by the Redstone Presbytery in Pennsylvania. His home church was Bethany Presbyterian Church in Lumberton where his pastor, Rev. Dr. John Henry Hayswood, was a role model and mentor. Other role models included numerous uncles and cousins, as well as neighbors and friends, who patronized his father's barber shop, telling young Thomas stories about the McPhatter family and other folks in town. After high school, Thomas enrolled in Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, NC, majoring in history and political science.



Having suffered the loss of his front teeth in a Labor Day auto accident, he began college without front teeth, and was known on the boxing team as "Gums McPhatter." He also played football, and was active in many campus activities.

In his sophomore year he led a student strike to draw attention to the unwarranted expulsion of a fellow student. Due to his and others' efforts, the student was reinstated without blemish. That student faithfully phoned him daily during the last years of his life. Thomas was also active in national politics, helping to host Progressive Party candidates on the Smith campus and across North Carolina.

Midway through his college career, as he saw most of the men on campus leave for war, he had his theological deferment changed so that he could also serve. He enlisted in the United States Marine Corps and trained in segregated Montford Point at Camp LeJeune, NC, with other young men of African descent. He became a combat swimming instructor and an expert marksman. After Thomas finished basic training he was sent overseas for further training and preparation on the Big Island of Hawaii. He became a sergeant in charge of a platoon of men, and was a stern, but fair, leader. His men nicknamed him Sergeant Steelhead.



In February, 1945, Thomas was part of the Invasion of Iwo Jima. He disembarked on D+1, as sergeant of the Eighth Ammunition Company, responsible for all types of ammunition carried to the front lines. He prevented his men from entering a dangerous ammo dump right before it exploded.

He caught "fire" from superiors for refusing to obey an order to enter that dump, saving his men in the process. Thomas talked often about his time on Iwo Jima as being bloody and horrible. He saw men die next to him; he saw Japanese soldiers get blood transfusions directly from white American Marines; he saw atrocities of war that he didn't want to describe more than once.

He led his men to the airfield to recover ammo dropped from planes by parachute, so that Marines' ammo could be replenished. Also, as some Marines were climbing Mt. Suribachi to plant the first (and smaller) American flag on Iwo Jima, Thomas handed them a metal pole from a dunnage pile, so that they could place the flag on the mountain top.

After several weeks on Iwo Jima, and after most Marines were shipped off the island, the Eighth Ammo Company stayed to clean up loose, active ammunition. When the Eighth Ammo Company finally left Iwo Jima, it was time to prepare for the invasion of Japan. As he was waiting on ship outside of Sasebo, the Marines were told that atomic bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The war was soon over. McPhatter and thousands of other U.S. Marines went onto Japanese soil as occupiers, not invaders; the first Americans to see Japan since the time of Admiral Perry.

Upon return to the United States after the war, Thomas returned to college to finish his bachelor's degree. He also pledged for Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, which he came to love. Having promised God on Iwo Jima that he would give his life to Christ if he survived the war, he enrolled in JCSU's Seminary upon college graduation. During this time he met and married Genevieve Bryant, a JCSU undergraduate from Birmingham, Alabama. He and Genevieve lived in a trailer near trailers of other war vets in a section of campus called Silver City where they conceived their first child who unfortunately did not survive.

Upon finishing seminary, Thomas was ordained a Presbyterian minister and accepted a call to become pastor of St. Paul Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, Missouri. He and Genevieve would stay in Kansas City for about eight years and become parents of five children while there. Thomas took that church from a mission church holding services in a local auditorium, to a self-sustaining church in a new building. In fact, before he left that church, they were able to burn the mortgage. McPhatter was a dynamic part of Kansas City life during the 1950's and was elected Moderator of the Kansas regional Presbytery, requiring him to oversee all regional ordinations, of mainly White ministers. He was the first person of African descent to obtain a permit to play tennis on city courts. He held the police chief to task about officers who had abused their authority with some in the community by writing an editorial in the local paper called "Abuse of Authority." Another editorial, "A Passport to Eat," resulted from the ability of visiting African dignitaries to eat at local lunch counters where local Black citizens could not.

>In 1959, after several years in the U.S. Navy reserves as an officer and chaplain (while in Kansas City), Thomas McPhatter left St. Paul and assumed full time active duty as a naval chaplain. He moved his family to San Diego, and bought a house in Emerald Hills before shipping out to Okinawa. His was the first family of African descent to move into Emerald Hills.

At the time, the mayor of San Diego lived there, as did many other prominent white families. Before he shipped out, many of the families prevailed upon Thomas to sell them the house and move out of the neighborhood, saying, "this is a nice, quiet neighborhood, and we want it to stay that way." McPhatter did not budge.

His family stayed, and suffered threats, burning crosses and other harassment, while most of the white families moved out of the area, never to return. Thomas helped form the Emerald Hills Town Council and became active on the San Diego Park Board. He received a key to the city of San Diego from Mayor Curran, and many other awards for civic service. While in San Diego, Thomas and Genevieve had their sixth child.

Thomas served in the Navy as a chaplain during the most turbulent time, the 1960's, for Blacks in the military. During the Viet Nam conflict there was constant harassment of Blacks by Whites. In an integrated military, as a chaplain, he was often called upon to quell problems and potential riots. During that time, Thomas was not silent about the many instances of overt racism he saw on ships and bases overseas. For these efforts he was deemed a "troublemaker", and in 1969 was forced out of the Navy, not to be reinstated until 1979 with the help of Cardinal John Jay O'Connor, who was at the time the U.S. Navy's Chief of Chaplains. During the 1970's McPhatter worked for the San Diego Urban League, for the Presbyterian Church in the Bay Area, and as a civil servant at NAVELEX in San Diego, a naval engineering facility, where he was an equal employment opportunity officer.

In 1979, Thomas re-entered the Navy on active duty at the age of 55. He served at Great Lakes NTC for one year, then was transferred for three years to Millington NAS in Memphis, Tennessee.

McPhatter's arrival in Memphis caused quite a stir among the other chaplains and officers, and others on base. He was told by three African American employees who moonlighted as waiters that they had overheard conversations about this "Nigger Captain with his Mercedes Benz" moving around the Naval Air Station as if he owned the place, creating unrest among the employees. He quietly went about his business of preaching, running religious education programs and presenting Martin Luther King Day celebrations. Once word was out about him, many from off base began to attend his Sunday services in the base chapel, and he made many friends on and off base. While at Millington, McPhatter was promoted to the rank of Captain, an O6 senior naval officer. He retired in 1983 from the Navy as a Captain and returned to work for three years at NAVELEX.

Upon retirement from NAVELEX, McPhatter served as a volunteer in the community, with the NAACP, the church and other organizations. He had also been interim pastor at Christian Fellowship United Church of Christ, and an associate pastor at Golden Hill Presbyterian Church, as well as part-time preacher at other San Diego churches, including Southeast Presbyterian Church.

>Thomas McPhatter wrote a book about his life. He called it, "Caught in the Middle, a Dichotomy of an African American Man - They Called Him Troublemaker." He had been a speaker on many occasions, from a memorial service for John F. Kennedy in 1963 at the Los Angeles Coliseum, to the 50th Anniversary of Iwo Jima ceremony and the VJ Day 50th Anniversary ceremony, both in Washington, DC, in 1995.

He had been called upon by friends and strangers to mediate disputes, counsel families and mentor young people. He often said that the "world was his parish." McPhatter recently contributed a large sum to found the Thomas H. McPhatter Leadership Institute at his alma mater, Johnson C. Smith University, as well as funding a scholarship there in his name.

Thomas will be remembered as a having a strong, commanding personality - and was what some would call an "alpha male." Often charismatic, inspiring, challenging, passionate and unyielding, he was also a loving father and husband, and a faithful, lifelong friend. Thomas was viewed by some as a ladies' man, yet he said that if had done all that he was rumored to have done, he would have died long ago. Thomas enjoyed a good party, loved to dance, loved to play and especially win at tennis, and could spontaneously create poems about friends and loved ones.

He loved holidays with family, visiting old friends, and before the days of flat phone rates, often spent over \$500 per month on long distance calls to family, friends and former parishioners. Some would call him stubborn, but he would say he was just being right.

And then would add that he hated to be always right. Ever the preacher, he would be reminded in conversation that he was "preaching to the choir." Thomas waged a tough fight to stay with us, often saying that heaven was his home, but he was not homesick. He died peacefully on May 1, 2009. Now he is home at last.

Thomas H. McPhatter is survived by his wife, Suzanne; his first wife, Genevieve and their children, Thomas Hayswood, Doretha Annette, Mary Elizabeth and her husband Thomas Allston, George Howard, Joseph Demtrius and Neil Lamumba; and a host of grandchildren, great-grandchildren, numerous cousins, nieces, nephews, brothers and sisters in-law, and stepchildren; a son, Darryl, his wife and children, and a multitude of friends from all around the country.

Suzanne McPhatter

