

Asheville High's 'The Colonel' touched many lives, friends say
Alfred I. Thomas, who founded Marines' JROTC at school, dies at 83

by Angie Newsome, STAFF WRITER
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ASHEVILLE — A beloved former Asheville High School teacher known for his strength and steady belief in his students died in his sleep Saturday after an extended illness.

North Asheville resident Col. Alfred I. Thomas, 83, worked for 21 years as the senior instructor for the Marine Corps Junior ROTC program, which he established

A football coach, he was also a decorated 33-year veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, having served in World War II, Korea and the Vietnam War. He was awarded six Silver Star medals for his service.

"He was our Marine," said Bob Thomas, one of four children he had with his wife, Helen. "Everything you picture in a Marine, that was my dad."

Scores of students credit his positive spirit and his expectation of excellence for helping shape their lives during and after high school. Barrel-chested and known for his strong hands and big hugs, Thomas' big heart drove him to dedicate himself to the school and its students, family and friends said.

"He was there through a lot of personal trials of mine," said Asheville resident and former student Sharon Pace. "If we were having problems at home, he would encourage me there. He wouldn't let me quit no matter what kind of problems I was having."

He was compassionate, but he also had a streak of competitiveness.

The Junior ROTC won eight first-place and eight second-place Marine Corps Reserve Officers Association Awards under his leadership. These awards honor units with exceptional community and school service and successful drill and rifle competitions.

"People call up here and say if it hadn't been for 'The Colonel,' they wouldn't be here, literally," said Master Sgt. James "Top" Duncan, as he sat Monday in Thomas' old office at Asheville High School. "He was the one that kept them going. It was through force and not letting them down."

He taught students the value of teamwork, added former student, Mayor Terry Bellamy.

"No matter how well I performed (on the drill team), if the whole team didn't perform well, we didn't win," she said. "It wasn't just about one person, it was about everybody moving forward together."

Moving forward seems a little tough now for his family, and for Duncan and former Asheville High football coach Lou Fogle, two who have become like family to the Thomases.

"Everyone else called him 'The Colonel,'" Fogle said, "but I always called him a hero."

