

## W. Ian Thomas: *The Adventurous Life*

Paraphrased and expanded by Dan Trygg from *They Found The Secret*, by V. Raymond Edman, with additional information from biographical articles *Major Influence: A Tribute to Major W. Ian Thomas* by Dr. Franklin L. Kirksey, from Wikipedia, and from the website of Torchbearers International

**Some Christians learn that *the Lord can make life an adventure*. Major W. Ian Thomas of England was one.**

Walter Ian Thomas was born in Hamstead, London, England, to Albert J. and Jennie Thomas on September 13, 1915. **Reared in a "respectable" middle-class English home, he was taken to church and taught the precepts of Christian morality. He learned little or nothing of the Bible, however,** either at home or in the church attended by the family.

**At age twelve, he was invited to a Bible study group of the Crusaders' Union** by a lad of thirteen who, during that year, had received Christ as his Savior. **The Bible began to be meaningful to young Ian, and the following summer at the age of thirteen he was converted to Christ** at a Crusaders' Union camp. That decision was made when he was alone, and simply by praying earnestly, "Lord Jesus, please be my Savior!"

**At age fifteen, he felt convinced that he should devote all of his life to the service of the Lord Jesus.** He told God that he would become a missionary. **He began to preach, out in open air meetings,** at that early age. **He was also actively engaged in Sunday school work, as well as in the Crusaders' Bible class.** Life began to be a round of ceaseless activity. During this time, he began to consider what part of the world to focus on for his missionary work, and how to best prepare to be effective on the field. He met a missionary doctor serving the Housa band of indigenous peoples in Nigeria, West Africa. He was so strongly impressed by this man of faith that **it became his ambition to also be trained as a doctor, and relocate to Nigeria to devote himself to missionary work** there. "My parents were wonderfully good," he said, "and they gave me choice of any career that I would like, and so I went, at the age of seventeen, to London University to study at St. Bartholomew's Hospital."

**At the university, Ian became a leader in the Inter-Varsity Fellowship group.** If any evangelistic activity was going on, this youthful zealot was "buzzing around the place, every holiday, every spare moment!" **He started a slum club in London's East End. "Out of a sheer desire to win souls," he said, "to go out and get them, I was a windmill of activity, until, at age nineteen, every moment of my day was packed tight with *doing* things: preaching, talking, counseling."**

In the Major's own words we continue his story. **"The only thing that alarmed me was that *nobody was converted!*** That gets a little discouraging after a bit, doesn't it? The *more* I did, the *less* happened, ...and it was not a question of insincerity. The prospects and the environment were good, but just *nothing happened!* I became deeply depressed, because I really loved the Lord Jesus Christ with all my heart, and I wanted to be made a blessing to my fellow men. But I discovered that forever doubling and redoubling my efforts in order to win souls, ...rushing here and dashing there, taking part in this campaign, taking part in that campaign, preaching in the morning, preaching in the evening, talking to the Bible class, witnessing to this one, counseling with another..., did nothing, *nothing*, NOTHING to change the utter barrenness, the emptiness, the uselessness of my activity. I tried to make up with *noise* what I lacked in *effectiveness* and *power*.

**"Thus by the age of nineteen, I had been reduced to a state of complete exhaustion spiritually, until I felt that there was no point in going on.** There was certainly no point in going to Africa as a missionary, ...because if it was a question of energy and earnestness and zeal and doing things, well then, *that* had failed, and *I did not know any other answer*. I was prepared to go to Africa and be as *useless* there as I was already in England. There is nothing magic about getting on a boat! There is nothing magic about changing your geographical position, or putting on a little pair of tropical shorts and a sun helmet! *That* will not make you a soul-winner over night. Do not imagine that you will be any more spiritually effective on the mission field than you are in your own home town. Indeed, you will find it a thousand times more difficult!

**"Then, one night in November, that year, just at midnight, in my room at home, I got down on my knees before God, and I just wept in sheer despair.** I said, 'Oh, God, I know that I am saved. I love Jesus Christ. I am perfectly convinced that I am converted. With all my heart I have wanted to serve You. **I have tried to my uttermost and I am a hopeless failure! So far as doing anything more, I am finished. I am not going to be a missionary. It is useless for me to continue like this.'** That night things happened.

"I can honestly say that *I had never once heard from the lips of men the message that came to me then*. I never had read it in print; but God, that night, simply focused upon me the Bible message of "Christ Who is our Life". **This was the moment He had been waiting for;** seven weary years He had watched me running round and round in the wilderness! He had been waiting for the time when at last I would fall down in hopeless despair. **I heard His voice: "To me to live is Christ. ... I am the way, the truth, and the life. ...If, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life... When Christ *who is our life* shall appear, then shall we appear with Him in glory.'** Life! New Life! To me to live is Christ !

"It just came from every area of God's Word, ...and very kindly and very lovingly the Lord seemed to make it plain to me that night, through my tears of bitterness: 'You see, for seven years, with utmost sincerity, **you have been trying to live for Me, on My behalf, the life that I have been waiting for seven years to live through you. I have been there the whole time.** All the things you have been pleading for, all the things for which you have been asking, *have been yours* since the day seven years ago, at your request and invitation, I came into your heart at that Crusader boys' camp. But, you see, **although you have given mental consent to the truth that I have been in your heart, ...and have accepted it as a theory..., you have lived totally ignoring the fact. You have been busy trying to do for Me all that only I can do through you.** Now supposing I am your life, and you begin to accept it as a *fact*, then I am your strength! You have been pleading and begging for that for seven

years. *I am* your victory, in every area of your life, *if you want it!* I am the One to whom it is perfectly natural to go out and win souls; and *I* know precisely where to go to find them. **Why don't you begin to depend on Me,** and say "Thank You."

**That night, all in the space of an hour, Ian Thomas discovered the secret of the adventurous life.**

He said: "With nothing to support the theory, and without the testimony of any other known Christian to the facts, I simply said to the Lord Jesus Christ that night, 'Well, it is *that*, or *nothing!* **If this is true, then I am going to thank You for it in sheer cold-blooded faith,** ...with no evidence to support it..., and nothing but a history of failure behind me! **I am going to thank You that if You are my life, and this is true, then You are my victory, You are my strength, You are my power, You are my future!** You are the One Who is going to go out now, *clothed with me*, to do all that I so hopelessly have been trying to do in the past seven years!' Then I went to sleep!

**"I got up the next morning to an entirely different Christian life!** But I want to emphasize this: I had not received one iota more than I had *already had* for seven years! I had *had* the Lord Jesus, ...equal to all my need, and in whom I *had been blessed* with every spiritual blessing in heavenly things..., for the *whole of those seven years!* Now, however, I stepped out on my way to the university that morning with a *new* song in my heart. I was saying, '**Lord Jesus, I thank You that for the first time in my life, this is Your day! I no longer have the burden of running my own life!**'

"I can remember that on my way down to the university, I thought over the meeting that I was to take on the following Sunday. It was a boys' class, and I said, 'Well now, Lord, *You* are going to speak to that boys' class, isn't it wonderful? Yesterday, I thought *I* was going to, but *You* are going to now! I thank You, dear Lord, for the boys that *You* are going to save.' I did not know how many boys there *were* in that Bible class, but I began to dream dreams, and I thought, 'Well, *maybe thirty will be converted.*' Not bad for a start! 'For the first time in my life, I'll dare to invite boys, at the end of that meeting, to come and see me if they want to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior.' Now I had never done *that* in my life, and for a very good reason -- I had not *expected* them to come, and I did not want to look like a fool! Now, I thought, 'Lord Jesus, *this* is different!' The following Sunday, up I went, and found there about ninety boys in the class. **I just spoke simply about the Lord Jesus Christ, and at the end I said, 'If any of you chaps want to receive Jesus Christ as your Savior this afternoon, I am going to be here. Just come and talk to me afterwards.'** *Thirty boys came and talked to me afterwards!* I hardly knew what to do with them, but I just did the best I could, and I believe God honored the desire of their hearts in spite of my clumsiness!

"Of course this was joyous to me; and **it happened day after day, day after day!** It did not matter what the meeting was. When I stepped out to the university that Thursday morning, I was stepping out into a new land. This was *Canaan!* I had had no memories of Canaan. I stepped out in blind faith. I was like the parachuter, just pulling the cord and jumping into nothing! *Now*, however, I *had* a memory! A memory that was going to *reinforce my faith* for the *next* step into Canaan!

"So for the *next* meeting, I thought, 'Well, it worked *last* time. I wasn't quite sure that it *would* work, but it *did*; and so I will reckon upon Him again for *this* meeting.' **I thanked the Lord again for the folks who were going to be saved, and I gave the invitation to meet me afterwards, and others were converted.** When I bumped into folk on the street, I seemed always to be bumping into the right people! 'This is an extraordinary thing,' I thought. '**For seven years I was always bumping into the wrong people, and now, I can't help bumping into the right people!**' *For five weeks, almost every day, people were converted.*"

*Christian friends began to notice that something was different in the life of God's young servant.* He met Christians who were as weary and exhausted as he had been, and **he was able to share with them the secret** of the Life that removes depression and frustration. **He and they were discovering that fullness of life is in Christ Himself, and only in Him.**

"At the end of five weeks God made it very plain to me He had something more to say. He had just begun to whet my appetite. He said, '**That is My life. You know perfectly well that it has nothing to do with you,** because it happened overnight! It is *not* a new *method*. It is *not* a new *technique* that you have learned. It is simply *My life*; being what *I* am, doing the inevitable. This is now the thing you have got to realize; **you cannot have My life for your program. You can only have My life for My program!** That is the next issue you have got to face. *In My program you are not going to be a doctor, and you are not going to Africa as a missionary.* I am not complaining, that plan was sincerely conceived; but...', God made this quite plain to me. He was very kind. 'You are going to leave the university *now*,' He said. '**This is such a precious truth that you have that I am going to send you up and down throughout the British Isles to tell folk about it.** There are lots of hungry folk, just like you were, amongst the Christians, and waiting to be "bumped into" are lots of unconverted folk.'"

**Thus step by step the Most High led His trusting and obedient servant into paths that he did not foresee, nor choose, but they were pathways of service eminently satisfying and always adventurous.** Instead of medical school and the mission field, the ministry was evangelism throughout Britain, especially among young people. He labored with the likes of Alan Redpath of the National Young Life Campaign, and Tom Rees of Youth on the March. **Before World War II broke out, he had six wonderful years of ever-expanding ministry in sharing the secret of the Life that is Christ.**

Major Thomas testifies: "It was just *His* victory. It was just what *He* was. I found that the simpler I could make it, the more blessing He gave; and whenever I tried to be complicated or clever, He just closed down. Only as I related situations to Him, did I find that He undertook. As soon as I related a situation to myself, He retired into the background. So I soon learned to count upon Him, because then things happened! **That is the secret; it is so simple! Just to relate everything to the Lord Jesus, and take your hands off to stand back and say, 'I thank You, Lord, this is Your situation!'**"

**Such a course is not inactivity, as the Major explained, it is simply Christ-activity.** "It is all in Christ, you see; and all of Christ is yours! You can know that God has a precise place for you, which is the perfect place in His perfect plan. If never before, commit yourself totally to Him, and say, '**Lord Jesus, what a wonderful thing it is that You know precisely what You want to do through me.** You have all the beautiful threads all ready to weave into the program and pattern of things. **Now I am Yours!** *I do not want any other program, ...any other kind of life..., but the one that You Yourself are*

*prepared to live in and through me!* I know, now, that all is well for me, for time and eternity." **That commitment can open the door for you to the life of adventure with God!**

As a young man of 24, when the Second World War broke out, Major Ian Thomas courageously enlisted to serve in an infantry battalion in the British Army, and fought throughout the entire duration of the war. He fought in Belgium, France, was evacuated at Dunkirk (1940), then he was sent to North Africa, Greece, Italy, and spent his last year (1947) in the Army of Occupation in Germany. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for meritorious and distinguished service in wartime. This was the second next highest award for service given to Army officers, behind the Victoria Cross. He also received the Territorial Decoration, another Army award for long service."

Way back in the early 1800's, a George Marton became the Lord Lieutenant of Lancaster County in England. He and his wife, Lucy, commissioned the construction of a summer home, called Capernwray. It was designed as a large, luxury estate for a family of five, with thirty servants. Originally the estate was quite large, including 27 farms in the area. By the time of World War II, the Marton family was reduced to one, a widow who lived alone, along with a few servants. On September 11, 1946, the whole of the Capernwray estate went up for auction. **Capernwray Hall was described as "...one medium-sized family residence", when it reality it was this large country home with over twenty rooms!**

Major Ian Thomas was still serving with the British Army in Germany, but *for some time he had been longing for a place where European young people could escape the devastations of war, and come to a place that could not only provide a good recreational holiday in the physical sense, but where they could also hear clearly the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ in their lives. Somehow, he became aware of this opportunity. He sent a telegram to his wife, Joan, asking her to go and bid for Capernwray Hall at the auction.* She attended the auction with a friend of the family who would do the actual bidding. Together they scraped together the war savings they could, and they were able to purchase Capernwray Hall for just a little more than what they had in hand. **Thus, this former country estate became the property of the Thomas family.**

When Major Thomas, returned home from the war, he and Joan determined to open their hearts and doors to European young people. Providing them with lodging and food in a holiday setting, Major also gave insightful teaching from the Bible, and soon these guests began to discover the adventure of knowing Jesus Christ personally. **Thus it was that Torchbearers International** (initially known as the "Capernwray Missionary Fellowship of Torchbearers") **began in northern England at Capernwray Hall in 1947.** (It was the German youth who came in those early years to Capernwray who began calling themselves the "Fackeltraeger" or "carriers of the torch", and so the name "Torchbearers" was born.) Through Capernwray's doors have come thousands of people including helicopter pilots, ex-nuns, jockeys, future diplomats, nurses, computer programmers, plumbers, teachers, carpet layers -- people from every land, background, and tongue. **The dynamic reality of the Christian life as a relationship with the indwelling Christ began to rekindle the lives of hundreds from all over Europe** as Bible Schools sprang up first in Germany and then Austria. **Over the years, the ministry has spread to every continent in 26 different ministry centers, and thousands of people each year have been changed by the reality that first touched the life of Ian Thomas at the age of 19.**

Central to Torchbearers' theology is the belief that the way in which one lives the Christian life is by putting aside the self-directed life, and allowing Christ to live his life through you in a very literal way. This is the essential teaching of the Keswick Convention, for which Thomas had been a featured speaker. Major W. Ian Thomas stated his beliefs in the foreword he wrote for well-known Higher Life proponent Bob George in his book, "Classic Christianity".

"There are those who *have* a life they never *live*. They have come to Christ and thanked Him only for *what He did*, but *do not live in the power of who He is*. Between the Jesus who 'was' and the Jesus who 'will be', they live in a spiritual vacuum, trying with no little zeal to live *for* Christ a life that *only He can live* in and through them, ...perpetually *begging* for what in Him they *already have!*"

The Major practiced and promoted the teachings and worship consistent with the spiritual depth and reality of the Keswick tradition, which emphasized the reality of a higher life in Christ. **Following is a sample of Thomas' teaching:**

#### **What Kind of Christian? by Major W. Ian Thomas**

"God is the absolute source of righteousness, but there is also an absolute source of unrighteousness—the devil. All human activity derives from one or the other of these two origins. That is why the Bible says, "Whatsoever is not *of faith* is sin" (Romans 14:23 KJV). **Whatever does not derive from your attitude of total dependence upon God, ... whatever does not release God's activity through your life..., is sin. It is sin because it stems from an attitude of independence that makes you open to any and all of Satan's deceptions in his long history of usurping God's authority.** Every step you take, every attitude you adopt, every decision you make, everything you do and all you hope to be, is either in dependence upon the God who created you as His own dwelling place, or else the byproduct of the demon spirit of this world, 'who now works in the sons of disobedience' (Ephesians 2:2), and who perpetuates his lies through a mindset of self-reliance in fallen humanity.

**"The Bible calls this attitude of independence a 'carnal mind' (Romans 8:7). It is a mind that is 'set on the things of the flesh' rather than on 'the things of the Spirit' (Romans 8:5).** It means exercising the faculties of your personality in ways that are *not dependent* on the God whose presence alone imparts to you the quality of true humanity that He always intended for you. **It means thinking godlessly.** *You* take a step, *you* make a decision, *you* conceive *your* plans, *you* assume a responsibility, all *without relating the situation to God*, to His guidance and to all that He is within you.

**"This carnal mind can be in the believer just as much as in the unbeliever.** Carnal or "fleshly" Christians have been regenerated by the restoration of the Holy Spirit to their human spirit. In certain ways, however, *they still repudiate the Spirit's legitimate right to reestablish the rule of Christ in their minds, in their emotions, and in their wills.* **Although they profess Christ as Redeemer, their actions and decisions typically are made for the sake of their own interests.** They are

made for who *they are in themselves*, rather than *for God's interests and for who He is*. Their minds are still the plaything and the workshop of the devil, for **the devil is smart enough and cunning enough that he can always persuade countless numbers of professing Christians to try and be Christians without Christ**. They are willing to do anything for Jesus' sake, but **they fail to understand that His presence is absolutely imperative to do it, that without Him we are nothing, have nothing, and can do nothing**.

**“To be a carnal Christian is to still claim the right to exercise your own jurisdiction, make your own decisions and plans, and choose your own pathway. But you will be useless to God...**

**“What kind of Christian do you want to be? To choose to be a carnal Christian is to choose spiritual oblivion.** But if you decide genuinely that Christ must *be* everything, and *have* everything, in your life, ...if you say in your heart, ‘I want *nothing less* than to become everything for which Christ’s blood was shed’..., then *He* is ready to lead you into discoveries that can completely revolutionize your whole humanity for time and eternity.” — *The Indwelling Life of Christ*, pp 33-35.

**Major W. Ian Thomas has been and will continue to be a significant influence in the world.** He is frequently cited by many Christian leaders in sermons, articles and books. His work that began over 60 years ago continues to express itself through the Torchbearers International Ministry which he founded. Testimony to the effectiveness of his ministry will echo throughout eternity by the many influenced and disciples by Torchbearers International, like South American evangelist Luis Palau, or pastor D. Stuart Briscoe, and a great multitude of others.

**His words continue to carry weight and to wield influence in the lives of men and women all over the world.** Many of the Major’s words are recorded on audio with Capernwray Media Ministries, and are available on the Internet. Thomas authored several books which include, [The Mystery of Godliness](#); [The Saving Life of Christ](#); [If I Perish, I Perish](#); and [The Indwelling Life of Christ: All of Him in All of Me](#), all of which are available in many bookstores and on Amazon.com. **His watchword was, “You can’t—He never said you could— He can, He always said He would. So, let Him.”**

Major Thomas died, on August 1st, 2007, just shy of his 93th birthday. To the end he remained a faithful servant of the Savior who saved his life so many years ago. His legacy continues to live on in the lives of those who have been touched by the ministry he founded. All of his sons are involved in various aspects of the ministry here and abroad.

## **Observations From W. Ian Thomas’ Life:**

**Raised in a middle-class English home.**

**Went to church and was taught Christian morality, but knew little of the Bible.**

**At age 12, was invited to a youth Bible study group.**

**Trusted in Christ as Savior at Bible Camp at age 13.**

**At age 15, felt called to devote his entire life to serving Christ. Planned to be a missionary.**

**Began to preach in the open, taught Sunday school and Bible study class.**

**Planned to be trained as a doctor and become a missionary in Africa.**

**At college, age 17, was involved in Inter-Varsity Fellowship. Started a “slum club” outreach.**

**Was incredibly busy at teaching, counseling, evangelizing, but saw *no one* converted!**

**Became increasingly frustrated and desperate over the lack of fruitfulness in his ministry.**

**By age 19, was burned out, depressed, and told the Lord he was ready to quit.**

**That night God spoke to him. Said He had been *waiting* for him to come to the end of himself.**

**Revealed to him the truth that only Christ, Who was in him, could live the Christian life.**

**Instead of him trying to live *for* Christ, He was to trust Christ to live *through* him!**

**This opened up an entirely new Christian experience – a life of adventure!**

**Immediately experienced a new joy and freedom in living.**

**For the next five weeks, people came to Christ almost every day, through contact with Jesus in him.**

**Then God called him to give up his plans for his life, leave college and serve Him.**

**For the next five years, became a travelling evangelist and youth worker.**

**Fought in the British Expeditionary Forces for the next eight years in the Second World War.**

**Began to have a burden for the youth of Europe, to start some kind of Christian retreat center.**

**Was able to purchase English estate for an incredibly low sum of money.**

**Used Capernwray as a ministry center to evangelize and disciple youth.**

**This grew to a world-wide ministry, with ministry centers in 26 locations around the world.**

**Ian became a popular speaker, recognized teacher and widely published author.**

## **God Hunt 10: God Becomes Real to Those Who Yield, Expect, and Act**

**Hebrews 11:6**

**Romans 6:8-13; 8:5-14**

**II Cor. 3:4-6; 4:5-18; 6:1-10**

**Rom. 12:1-8; Eph. 2:10**