

OBITUARY

Pacifist Murray Thomson waged an unrelenting campaign for peace

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Canadian peace activist Murray Thomson.

COURTESY OF THE FAMILY

Murray Thomson, dean of the Canadian peace movement, used to explain that it took a devastating act of bloodshed to convert him to peace activism.

Having left university for air-force training during the Second World War, he had earned his wings and prepared to fly sorties in Europe, but he never saw combat. With news of the atomic bomb, he wasn't initially concerned. His sister was in a Japanese prison camp in Shanghai. Maybe the attack would speed her release.

The gruesome realities of mass death from radiation changed his mind. A new era of war had begun. As had Mr. Thomson's 75-year journey in search of a peaceful world.

"Hiroshima made me a pacifist," he insisted.

On the eve of his final trip to the hospital prior to his death on May 2, Mr. Thomson was busy strategizing for his latest peace campaign and sent a final upbeat message to his long-time friend Ernie Regehr. Mr. Thomson, who was 96, had long specialized in turning his cascade of new ideas into yet another campaign. He and Mr. Regehr had started Project Ploughshares, Canada's leading peace and disarmament group, in 1976. And now, Mr. Thomson was eager to persuade the supporters of Canadians for a Nuclear Weapons Convention (he'd organized the group a few years before turning 90) that it was time to join the Don't Bank on the Bomb campaign. It is a project of the Dutch group PAX, affiliated with the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.

"I learned that we absolutely needed to be part of promoting divestment from companies that build elements of nuclear weapons," Mr. Regehr said. "Militant and energetic to the last – there's just a hint of understatement there."

Born Dec. 19, 1922, to Presbyterian parents in Taokow, China, Murray McCheyne Thomson was an eyewitness to civil war as a young teenager. He had seen heads impaled on bamboo poles.

The sixth of seven "mishkids," Mr. Thomson came to Canada in 1937 with his missionary parents, Margaret and Rev. Andrew Thomson. After the Second World War, he returned to the University of Toronto, studying with eminent economic historian Harold Innis. Mr. Thomson soon headed west to join the Department of Adult Education in Tommy Douglas's Saskatchewan government. After graduate studies at the University of Michigan, Mr. Thomson moved to Thailand as a UNESCO fellow at the International Institute for Child Study.

Along the way he became a Quaker and would marry Thai student activist and biophysicist Suteera Vichitranonda at the Friends Meeting House in Toronto in 1964. The couple had met in Darjeeling while Mr. Thomson was working for the American Friends Service Committee. He later explained the Society of Friends with characteristic wit, observing that many regard Quakers as "a good-natured but rather soft-hearted people, a bit politically naïve, who eat Quaker oats for breakfast."

The couple moved to Bangkok and worked with the Canadian non-governmental organization CUSO. Randy Weekes, a CUSO volunteer at the time and later executive director of Canadian

Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, was inspired by Mr. Thomson. Mr. Weekes recalled how much he was challenged by his dynamic mentor. He said he repeatedly noticed how people meeting Mr. Thomson “suddenly began to act with new attention and energy in the face of a world badly in need of efforts to bring about international peace.”

What the Vietnamese call “the American War” was bringing legions of American military personnel to Thailand, a staging ground for aerial attacks on Vietnam. Bangkok hosted “R&R” leaves for men who caroused in the bars and brothels. Mr. Thomson left Southeast Asia increasingly committed to peace work.

Mr. Thomson became CUSO’s executive director in 1974, but was unsettled running a big organization. He was excited the following year to read the book *Making a Killing*, in which Mr. Regehr, a Mennonite, analyzed Canada’s role as a major exporter of weaponry and Ottawa’s promotion of an arms industry that had thrived during the wars in Southeast Asia.

It was a key turning point for the two members of Canada’s peace churches. After meeting in the CUSO offices in 1976, they blended their passions and very different skills. Mr. Regehr was the researcher and policy analyst. Mr. Thomson, who soon left CUSO, was the organizer and fundraiser.

Ploughshares began on a shoestring, sustained by Mr. Thomson’s infectious enthusiasm. In the early years, expenses would consistently outstrip income and the two simply hoped for the best. “For some inexplicable reason I’d drive home to Waterloo [Ont.], fully optimistic and confident,” Mr. Regehr laughed. “Murray had said ‘It’s going to work!’ Fact is, it usually did.”

Project Ploughshares would become a fully-staffed peace research group, promoting peace-building policies and working to prevent armed violence.

Mr. Thomson stayed with Ploughshares for seven years before going on to launch or co-found several other peace organizations. The Group of 78, a gadfly foreign-policy group focused on nuclear weapons and supporting the United Nations; The Peacefund Canada Foundation; Canadian Friends of Burma; Seniors for Social Responsibility; and Peace Brigades International.

Several such groups took office space in a converted Ottawa canning factory. Mr. Thomson’s playful sense of humour carried him and those around him through some dark times, his friend Debbie Grisdale explained. A generation younger than Mr. Thomson, she worked down the hall at Physicians for Global Survival, making common cause in opposing the military-industrial complex.

“He provided an antidote to flagging energies, [saying]: ‘Inch by bloody inch, we’ll beat ‘em yet, kid,’ ” she recalled.

His prodigious energy earned Mr. Thomson the Pearson Peace Medal and, in 2001, he was named an officer of the Order of Canada. The citation noted his lifetime devotion to world peace. “Selected to help establish the United Nations World Disarmament Campaign,” the citation also stated, “he played a critical role in drafting the policy document passed by the General Assembly.”

And he wasn’t ready to stop. In 2009, he initiated the Canadians for a Nuclear Weapons Convention (CNWC), an ambitious effort to get other Order of Canada members to support policy that would produce a world without nuclear weapons. He teamed up in this effort with Mr. Regehr, former Conservative MP, Senator and Ambassador for Disarmament Doug Roche, and Nobel Prize winner John Polanyi. (Jean Vanier, who died last week, was also a founding member.)

At his 90th birthday party, in 2012, Mr. Thomson told his well-wishers that 602 companions, officers and members of the Order of Canada had so far endorsed a call for a nuclear weapons convention to be a component of Canadian foreign policy. Several celebrants noted that he had

turned it into a fundraiser. By the time Mr. Thomson died, he had persuaded a total of 1,034 Order of Canada laureates, most complete strangers, to sign on.

"I never delayed the opportunity to talk to this lovable, decent man," Prof. Polanyi said. "I shall continue to harbour the hope that the next caller will say 'It's Murray.' Despite the grim subject, he would always bring brave new schemes and good cheer."

The secrets of her father's energetic longevity, Sheila Quarles explained, included mental exercise (organizing and chess) as well as tennis, lots of walks and yoga. "He learned it in India – no mat, mantras or special clothes."

Ms. Quarles added that his three granddaughters, with whom he engaged in regular games and contests, also kept him young. He kept playing his beloved fiddle at Ottawa's Colonel By retirement residence and chaired the residents' committee. She once noticed that the top item on a committee agenda was not housekeeping matters, but "Syrian refugees."

"For many years he lamented that he didn't feel like he was doing enough," Ms. Quarles explained, adding that he was grateful for a comfortable life with shelter, and food, family and friends.

"He often said, 'I'm working for human rights and social justice, but I live in a safe country and don't live under threat or persecution.' "

One Christmas he visited an Ottawa men's shelter, but not just for an hour or two, serving turkey dinner. Murray Thomson arrived Christmas Eve so that he could spend the night with people living with less, sleeping on a cot.

Mr. Thomson leaves his daughter, Sheila Quarles; granddaughters, Justine, Simone and Nicole; and his former wife, Suteera Vichitranonda.