



Thomas H. Saffer, SMA '52

(1935? – 2003)

Thomas entered Staunton Military Academy (SMA) in the fall of 1947 as an eighth grader from Middleburg, VA. He played varsity baseball, was in the Howie Rifles, and earned the Commandant's Ribbon as a sophomore, junior, and senior. Thomas graduated from SMA in 1952 as Captain (Shows him as 1st Sgt in Yearbook) of E Company and attended Virginia Military Institute (VMI) graduating in 1956. He was commissioned as a Marine Second Lieutenant, and his first posting was Camp Pendleton, CA.

He wrote a bestseller, "Countdown Zero," an account of his and other Marines' experiences as soldiers in the atomic testing in Nevada. His activism and congressional testimony as a result of the book were instrumental in gaining benefits for "atomic veterans."

He moved to Bass Lake, CA, near Oakhurst, from Orange County in 1994 where he and his wife, Barbara, operated a wholesale computer hardware business. He was a member of the Oakhurst Sierra Rotary Club, and he was involved in many of its community activities. He especially enjoyed reading to the elementary school children. He was also a contributor of articles in the Sierra Star newspaper.

Thomas Saffer died on March 9, 2003 in Bass Lake.

sierrastar.com, 13 Mar 2003 and zoominfo.com/p/Thomas-Saffer/305654931
Edits by Kelly McGavock, SMA '59

Editors note: Following are two reviews of Countdown Zero, co-authored by Thomas H. Saffer and Orville E. Kelly, that were posted on Amazon.Com:

Review by Michael Prator, Phoenix, AZ, on December 10, 2002

I first read "Countdown Zero" as an undergraduate political science major. Many years later, the book still haunts me. While the prose is easy to read, the subject matter and human context is evocative, unnerving, and disheartening. When you enlist into the military, you agree to relinquish some of your personal rights and freedoms in order to serve and protect your country. Implicit in this "contract" is the belief that the gov't would never deliberately and needlessly place you in harm's way without proper training and equipment. "Countdown Zero" exposes how the US Gov't completely voided this contract during the Cold War. This is a well-documented account of how two individual soldiers were repeatedly and callously exposed to the

lethal effects of atomic testing. These two soldiers (who were among tens of thousands of "Atomic Veterans") were physical witnesses to nuclear and thermonuclear weapons testing. Their vivid memories of seeing the blasts, feeling the searing heat and shock-waves, and even tasting the ionized air while marching towards ground zero or standing on the beach of a nearby atoll will raise the hairs on the back of your neck. The story of their quest for justice after the needless exposures will raise your blood pressure. This book will cause even the most ardent supporter of the American military and US Government to refrain from blindly believing everything he/she is told. The text does not question the necessity of nuclear weaponry, but it does question the methodology in which the weapons were tested, the exposure of US troops to the explosions, and the shameless tactics which the US Gov't used to try to cover-up the events and avoid responsibilities for its actions. Saffer and Kelly have created a harrowing account of shameful Cold War secrets and a chilling cautionary tale of blindly trusting any government entity in the future.

A Marine's View (anonymous) , May 5, 2004

Countdown Zero is the story of "Atomic Veterans," the Soldiers, Sailors, Airman and Marines as well as civilians who were unwitting victims of the "hidden" atomic war that occurred for years in the deserts of the southwestern US and islands of the Pacific. It is also the story of the coverups, the shameful denials of both medical and scientific evidence showing the damage done to many people, and it is, most importantly, the story of a man who fought the system that he'd originally believed in and the system that sought to erase his contributions to his Country... fought that system and WON - though he died in the process of winning. It's easy to say "what a shame," but when you're a Marine, the mere thought of a fellow Marine or other service member being used and tossed aside as these Atomic Veterans were is horrifying. Countdown Zero was a book I'd picked up on a whim in the Marine Corps Association Bookstore in Quantico, VA (the "Crossroads of the Corps") back in the late 80's. I got bored one night and actually started reading it and WOW! The stories - the evidence - the denials and betrayals were beyond ANY romance novel or science fiction book AND THIS REALLY HAPPENED! Funny thing is - one day it was suddenly "missing" from my barracks and I didn't have a chance to see a copy for another twelve years and I am GLAD I have it. READ THIS BOOK if you ever have the chance. That's all there is to it. READ IT.