

# Thomas

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and faced the prospect of becoming a quadruple amputee. Surgeons saved his left hand, but he confronted a long road to recovery and regaining his life.

For Thomas, the 10 days represent a lost period of time. When he woke up, he didn't know his surroundings. "They asked me where I was, and I said, 'Yankton?'" he said.

After his hospital discharge, Thomas was transferred to a burn unit. He began nearly three months of excruciating skin grafts, dressing changes and therapeutic baths.

"I had baths every three days," he said. "It was hell going into the water, but it felt good coming out."

At the same time, Thomas found that food made him vomit.

"I didn't eat for three months and lost my strength. I was like a skeleton," he said. "They had to give me a full nutrition replacement. It came in IVs and tasted like butter."

Thomas was finally discharged from the hospital and returned home. "It was the first time that I had smelled fresh air or had seen trees in months," he said.

Thomas began rehabilitation and returned to work six months to the day after he became sick. No longer a mechanic, he returned to a data entry position at Duncan Aviation.

"It felt great to go back to work. I would have been easy to get sucked into the black hole," he said. "You return to normal, whatever normal would be."

During his recovery, Thomas received emotional support from Kovanda. They met through a common bond — he suffered the same bleeding disorder as her young granddaughter, Abigail.

"You can't begin to describe how hopeless and scared you feel (about the condition)," Kovanda said. "We started Abigail's Angels on Facebook, promoting the Community Blood Bank. We are asking people to donate blood that is so essential (for people with this disorder)."

When she met Thomas, Kovanda was stunned to find another person with the bleeding disorder living in the same city. "I could be searching for people around the world (with the disorder), and here was someone across town," she said.

## REALIZING A DREAM

Thomas was saddened at the prospect of not being able to fly anymore. However, he discovered his dreams remained alive.

"I went to Seattle to see my brother for 10 days. He had a small Cessna and we were flying over Seattle in his plane," Thomas said. "He said, 'Why don't you fly? We can work around your disabilities.' So we looked into seeing what it would take to get back into flying."

Arriving back home in Lincoln, Thomas searched online for a medical provider willing to sift through his 1,000-page binder of medical records accumulated over 10 years. A shocked Thomas found an Illinois doctor immediately replying and offering to look at emailed records.

"Seven days later, he said he didn't see anything that would disqualify me (from flying)," Thomas said. "He condensed it down to 40 pages, and it went to the (Federal Aviation Administration) in Oklahoma City. He thought I would hear from the FAA in 14 days and not find anything wrong."

Thomas cleared the medical hurdle and was scheduled to fly with an official at the FAA site in Lincoln.

"We used a rental plane, and I went for a flight on an October or November day. There was no snow, but it was bitter cold," he said. "Flying is like riding a bike, where you never forget. I flew for 45 minutes, and everything went OK. It turned out well."

Receiving his FAA clearance, Thomas didn't wait long for his first flight. "I went up at 9 o'clock that night. I had never seen Lincoln alone at night, and it was my first flight since 2008," he said.

A sense of exhilaration overcame him, alone in the night sky.

"It was like a huge victory over all this crap," he said. "My life, (the disease) tried to take that away from me. They took away one hand. They took away my feet. But they couldn't take this (moment) away from me. I thought, 'Ha, victory is mine!'"

Thomas posted his flight on Facebook, seen by a stunned Kovanda. "I started crying," she said, showing emotion at the memory.

Thomas has flown 120 hours since last year, including trips to Kansas City, Sioux Falls and a visit to a brother in Denver. He has flown with a total of 20 passengers.

"For some, this was the first time they were flying, and here they were with a triple amputee," Thomas said, flashing a grin at the thought.

Kovanda, a screenwriter, knew the time had come to tell

Thomas' story. She is a 2011 alumni of Lew Hunter's Screenwriting Colony. Hunter, a Nebraska screenwriter, has worked as a writer and producers with major networks and studios. In addition, he has chaired and taught with the UCLA Department of Film and Television.

Kovanda also serves as president of the Nebraska Writers Guild, and Thomas is a member.

"We actually did the script first. We worked three weeks on the script and two months on the book. The script was 109 pages while the book was 276 pages," she said. "We have an e-book and are self-publishing, and we have kept the film rights. But we're not saying never to a commercial deal." The co-authors consulted

with Thomas' parents and other family members. The family contributed their perspective and provided details, such as what occurred during Thomas' 10 days in a coma.

"My parents have been really supportive," Thomas said, recalling one memory of his mother quietly knitting as she maintained a vigil at his bedside.

Thomas has seen the continuing impact of his ordeal on his loved ones.

"Writing their pieces (for the book and movie) isn't easy because they have to relive a lot of painful memories," he said. "When my mom read the first draft, she was crying."

Thomas hasn't stopped setting lofty goals in life. Within the next year, he wants to fly a high-

wing Cessna across the United States.

"We need to climb over one obstacle and focus on moving forward, not looking back," he said. "Things will be different. But different doesn't mean bad — just different."

For more information on the book, visit online at [www.modifiedflightplan.com](http://www.modifiedflightplan.com).

The book is available for purchase at Amazon.com in both print and Kindle versions. A book trailer video for Modified Flight Plan is posted at [http://youtu.be/mp\\_4vSKeQc](http://youtu.be/mp_4vSKeQc).

You can follow Randy Dockendorf on Twitter at [twitter.com/RDockendorf](http://twitter.com/RDockendorf)



COURTESY PHOTO  
Brian Thomas and co-author Lisa Kovanda live in Lincoln, Neb., and collaborated on both the book and movie script.

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