

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE
MONTCALM COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPUTY CLAYTON THOMAS

The scene — an isolated rural home invisible from the road because of its forested grounds — could have been the setting for a fairy tale. But the fatal standoff between sheriff's deputies and a suicidal gunman proved all too real.

The scene unfolded outside the small mid-Michigan village of Howard City just before 6 p.m. last June 1. A veterans' crisis hotline had contacted the Montcalm Sheriff's Department to request a well-being check on a Gulf War marine, who had threatened suicide. He had also vowed to "shoot the police in the eyes if they responded" to his call.

Howard City police, Montcalm County sheriff's deputies and Michigan State Police troopers moved quickly to the scene, forming a perimeter around the forested property where the barricaded gunman lived. Meanwhile Montcalm Sheriff's Deputy Clayton Thomas stationed himself in the woods on the home's west side, where he could watch the southwest corner of the residence.

The suicidal man, poking his long gun out his second-story window, repeated that he wanted everyone off his property and that he had a "superior firing position" for shooting at the officers.

Although a trained negotiator reached him by phone, the man persisted with his threats.

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A tense 90 minutes after law enforcement responded, the man walked out his front door and marched as though on a mission down the long, winding driveway toward two officers, who could neither see nor hear him because of the trees and the angle. All the time, he pointed his rifle straight ahead of him, continually threatening to shoot.

Meanwhile, Deputy Thomas inched toward the gun-wielding man, who was now about 150 feet from the front of his home amidst several large trees that protected the suspect and obscured him from Thomas' view.

Thomas heard Howard City Police Chief Steven DeWitt, who had been stationed with another officer east of the home, repeatedly — but to no avail — ordered the suspect to drop his gun.

DeWitt, aware he would soon lose sight of the gunman as the driveway narrowed and the woods thickened, fired a single shot at him.

Hearing the shot but unable to see the action, Deputy Thomas made his way toward the voices and gunfire. Positioning himself behind a pole barn, he spotted the suspect crouched behind a large tree with his rifle pointed directly at DeWitt, who continued trying to talk him down. The suspect's back was to Thomas.

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Fearing for DeWitt's life as well as the lives of other officers on the call, Thomas confronted the suspect. "Sheriff's Department," he shouted, now only about 40 feet from the man and his deadly rifle. "Drop the weapon."

The suspect reeled around, cursed the situation and tossed the long gun at Thomas with his right hand. But the battle was far from over. Thomas spotted a silver-and-black object, which he believed was a weapon, in the suspect's left hand. And he saw the man reach into his right waistband with his other hand.

Thomas fired at him once, but the man continued reaching into his waistband area. Thomas then fired two more times. The suspect crumpled to the ground.

Chief DeWitt warned that the suspect had a handgun and that his right hand was still near his right waistband. Both DeWitt and Thomas ordered the suspect to take his right hand away from his side. Although definitely alive, the man did not comply.

Still unsure whether or not the man had another weapon, Thomas and DeWitt held their positions as Thomas called EMS. When three more officers approached to cover them, Thomas and DeWitt walked up to the man, removed a large Gerber black-and-silver folding knife from his left hand and turned him over to EMS. He was pronounced dead at the hospital.

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The man's rifle was loaded with two rounds, one .22 caliber and the other .410 slugs. The gun's butt held additional live rounds.

Montcalm Deputy Clayton Thomas demonstrated the utmost bravery in saving the lives of fellow officers faced with an aggressive gunman whose clearly stated goals were to commit suicide by cop and to take an unknown number of law-enforcement officers down with him.

Deputy Thomas, your courage under extreme duress exemplifies the term "distinguished service." The Police Officers' Association of Michigan commends your heroic actions and utmost professionalism by awarding you our 2012 Distinguished Service Award.

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