



WEST CATHOLIC ALUMNI ASSOCIATION
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Lt. Gen. Thomas Rienzi '36



Retired Lt. Gen. Thomas Rienzi, an author and electronics engineer who became an ordained Catholic deacon in Hawaii after he left the Army, died Wednesday at Tripler Army Medical Center. He was 91.

A veteran of World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam, Rienzi was a supporter of veterans' rights in Hawaii and has been credited with pioneering the effort to enact a dental plan and lifetime medical care for retirees at military hospitals and clinics. He was also instrumental in establishing the Department of Veterans Affairs facility at Tripler Army Medical Center.

For many years, Rienzi served as chairman of the Veterans Council of Hawaii and the Friends of Tripler Medical Center. Max Cleland, former Veterans Administration chief and a U.S. senator from Georgia, told the Star-Advertiser that Rienzi was "the most unique leader in the U.S. Army and one of its best," adding, "He had an uncanny ability to find out the strength and weakness of the people and the units he commanded."

Cleland described his first meeting with Rienzi in 1966 when, as a second lieutenant, he reported to Fort Monmouth, N.J., to become Rienzi's aide. "It was not just a meeting, but an encounter," said Cleland. At 6 feet 6 inches, Rienzi towered over Cleland, a mere 6 feet 2, he recalled. "He was the best leader I ever came across," said Cleland, who lost both legs and his right forearm in Vietnam, where he earned the Silver Star and Bronze Star. Cleland said he last saw Rienzi in November, when he had dinner with his family after Cleland delivered the Veterans Day address at Punchbowl. Said Rienzi's son-in-law, Bob Bulkley: "It was like the last hurrah for Max and my father-in-law." Cleland noted that after his Army service, Rienzi could have made "big bucks," but instead spent three years studying to be a Catholic deacon.

While still in the service, Rienzi studied at Catholic seminaries in Washington, D.C., and Louvain, Belgium, and Terrence Cardinal Cooke ordained him in Heidelberg, Germany, in April 1979. After retiring in July 1979, Rienzi returned to Hawaii to serve the Catholic Diocese. He worked in parish ministries, including the hospital ministry at Tripler Army Medical Center, for 13 years.

Another colleague, Brig. Gen. William Scott, commanding general of 311th Signal Command at Fort Shafter, said: "Lt. Gen. Rienzi was truly a pioneer in the communication technology business. He helped develop what we rely on today insofar as our advanced electronic technology is concerned. Moreover, he remained engaged throughout life. He loved to mentor and teach young soldiers and they flocked to him because of his openness and integrity. He was an inspirational leader who will be missed by many people."

RIENZI WAS BORN in Philadelphia in 1919, graduated West Catholic Boys in 1936, and attended Lehigh University in Pennsylvania.



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He graduated in May 1942 from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where he was a tackle on the football team.

During World War II, Rienzi served as a company commander in the 96th Signal Battalion in China, Burma, and India.

In 1948, Rienzi received his master's degree in electrical engineering from the University of Illinois and was assigned to the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project at Sandia Base, N.M. For the next four years, he worked with the atomic weapons planning and implementation program, participating in more than 40 detonations. After the Korean War, he served a three-year tour as troop leader and instructor at West Point and in 1959 began his first Hawaii tour at Fort Shafter. In May 1966 he was assigned as commanding general and commandant of the Army Signal Center and School at Fort Monmouth.

Rienzi received a master's degree in international affairs from George Washington University and a certificate in business management from Pittsburgh University.

In September 1968, Rienzi became the deputy commanding general of the 1st Signal Brigade in Vietnam. He subsequently became its commanding general in February 1969, leading 23,000 soldiers in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand while also serving as the deputy chief of staff for communications and electronics in Vietnam.

Rienzi returned to Hawaii in June 1970 and assumed command of the Strategic Communications Command Pacific, consisting of more than 30,000 personnel. He served concurrently as the assistant chief of staff for communications-electronics at Fort Shafter.

Rienzi wrote the book "Vietnam Studies: Communications-Electronics, 1962-1970." He was promoted to lieutenant general in August 1977 and assumed duties as deputy director general, chief of staff, and chief engineer of the NATO Integrated Communications System Management Agency in Brussels, Belgium. In addition, he served for many years as chairman of the Army's Retirement Council of Hawaii, state recruiter for West Point and commander of the Hawaii Basha (chapter) of the China, Burma, India veterans. He was a member of the Pearl Harbor Rotary Club, the Outrigger Canoe Club, Knights of Columbus and the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. As a signal corps veteran, Rienzi has been inducted as a distinguished member of the Signal Regiment.

Survivors include his daughter, Sherri Bulkley, three grandchildren, seven great-grandchildren and a great-great-grandchild.

Memorial services will be held at 10 a.m. Dec. 27 at Star of the Sea, where he served as a staff member. Visitation will begin at 9 a.m.

Interment will be at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific at Dec 30 at the Punchbowl.