

## 12 vétérans de la Seconde Guerre mondiale décorés de la Légion d'Honneur

Dear Veterans,  
Ladies and gentlemen,  
Dear Friends,



Good afternoon. As the Consul General of France in Atlanta, I am extremely honored and quite moved to welcome you here this afternoon for this official ceremony during which I will bestow the insignia of the Legion of Honor upon 12 American veterans of World War II in the name of the President of the Republic of France.

It is a great privilege for me to act on behalf of the French authorities today, who wish to express their deepest gratitude on behalf of France and the French for all the

young Americans who left their homeland to defend, on French soil, the values of liberty and democracy which we have in common. The National Order of the Legion of Honor is the oldest, most prestigious French decoration.

Created in 1802 by Emperor Napoleon to recognize those who have rendered eminent services to the Republic of France or who have demonstrated exceptional courage, bravery, and a spirit of sacrifice beyond the ordinary, particularly in the military domain.

It is only befitting that we render homage this afternoon to these 12 veterans, whose families and friends I wish to warmly welcome, as they have accompanied them from around Georgia, or even as far as Alabama and Mississippi.



I am also very touched to decorate these 12 veterans of World War II. On the one hand, this is the first time that I have had the opportunity to host such a ceremony. On the other, when I was a child, I visited the beaches of Normandy as well as the American military cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, and I was able to measure the sum of courage necessary to cross the defense lines, a courage that was often paid for at the cost of life, in order to liberate France and Europe.



Today, we also remember the long-lasting French-American friendship, from Yorktown and Lafayette, to combats fought side by side during the First and Second World Wars to defend our shared founding values of freedom, justice, and democracy.

Dear Veterans, You embody this shared French-American history. You illustrate by your courage the friendship and shared values that so profoundly bind our two nations. We are gathered here today to honor you. I am going now to highlight your main heroic deeds during WWII, before officially bestowing the Legion d'Honneur upon you, one after the other by order of seniority.

I will start with...

#### **Major Richard Gibian**

Richard Gibian joined the Air Force on December 13, 1942. After an intensive training in the U.S., he left for the theatre of operations in Europe and joined the 373rd combat group of the 411th squadron, 9th Air Force as a captain.

Mr. Gibian's air squadron performed several air support and combat missions during the storming of Normandy and later

on in the North-east of France. They bombed and destroyed a variety of German means of transportation such as armoured trucks, tanks, trains, and landing strips in both France and Germany.

For his valiant actions, Mr. Gibian was decorated with the "Distinguished Flying Cross". In addition, along with the 411th Squadron, he was also awarded the Croix de Guerre with Palm.

#### **Captain Isaac H. Storey**

Mr. Isaac H. Storey entered into active duty on April 7, 1943 and left for the European Theater Operations on June 9, 1944 with the Company C of the 10th Regiment in the 5th Infantry Division. He participated with his unit in battles of Normandy, the Northeast of France, the Ardennes, and the Rhin. On September 10, 1944, Mr. Storey's unit was given the order to cross the Moselle River, as part of the operation to surround and capture the city of Metz. Beginning at dawn, they were quickly confronted with German crossfire, and by the afternoon, the American defensive line had been considerably reduced. Mr. Storey, the only remaining officer, gathered the remaining 43 men of the company of 165 in the nearby village of Arry. The next morning, identifying a hole in the American defense, he stationed his remaining men there where they subsequently inflicted numerous losses on the enemy.

For his brave actions he was decorated with the Silver Star. He also received a Purple Heart for wounds received during the European Theater Operations on January 22, 1945.

#### **First Lieutenant Charles G. Shepherd Jr.**

Mr. Charles G. Shepherd Jr. joined the army on December 28, 1943. Leader of a rifle platoon in the 121st Regiment of the 8th Infantry Division, he landed in Normandy on July 10, 1944 where he went on to participate in several combats. He crossed the cities of Coutances, Avranches, Saint-James, and Dinan, the last of which was liberated on August 6, 1944. During an operation on August 9, 1944, Mr. Shepherd was injured by a piece of shrapnel. Evacuated to England following these injuries, Mr. Shepherd resumed combat around January 5, 1945 and went on to fight in the campaigns of Ardennes, Rhénanie, and Central Europe.

He was decorated with the Purple Heart as well as the "Bronze Star" and "Silver Star".

#### **First Lieutenant William W. Varnedoe Jr.**

Mr. William W. Varnedoe Jr. left for Europe on January 31, 1945 with the 385th Bomb Group of the 8th Air Force

where he served as a navigator aboard the B-17 Bomber. His job was to follow the exact position of the airplane and indicate to the pilot the destination.

Though most of the combat missions that Mr. Varnedoe completed where in Germany, they required flying over French territory. After the Armistice, the 385th Bomb Group completed several round trips between Germany and France to return French workers from the Obligatory Work Service. Mr. Varnedoe received a "Thank you boys" certificate from the Dutch Government and a "Thank you America" Certificate from the French for his participation in combats in 1945.

#### **Technician Fourth Grade William J. Garrett**

Mr. William J. Garrett joined the army on October 30, 1943. In October 1944, he left for England where he joined the Company C of the 245th Engineer Combat Battalion as First Cook.

On December 26, 1944, he arrived in France with his unit in the city of Le Havre. They crossed France toward the Eastern Front until Reims. Mr. Garrett and his unit stayed in Moselle until the end of January 1945 where they swept for mines, built bridges, and cleared roads for tanks and allied troops to pass.

Mr. Garrett then continued combats in the Ardennes and on to Germany. He was awarded a Good Conduct Medal.

#### **Technician 5th Grade Julian P. Rau**

Mr. Julian P. Rau entered active duty on October 28, 1942 and left the United States for the Mediterranean Theater Operations on June 6, 1943. There, he joined the Company D of the 30th Regiment in the 3rd Infantry Division as a mortarman.

Mr. Rau participated in campaigns in Sicily, Naples-Foggia, where he received a Bronze Star medal as well as in Anzio and Rome-Arno before landing in the South of France on August 15, 1944.

Mr. Rau then participated in campaigns in the Rhine, the Ardennes and Central Europe. On the nights of January 23 and 24, 1945, his division, the 3rd Infantry Division successfully crossed the Ill River and Fecht River in Alsace and seized the first enemy position, despite extremely difficult climate conditions. For this and other heroic endeavours in the Northeast of France, the 3rd Infantry Division was decorated with the French Croix de Guerre with Palm.

#### **Technician 5th Grade Morton B. Waitzman**

Mr. Morton B. Waitzman joined the army on January 2, 1943 at the age of 20. He was trained in communications before joining the combat communications unit of the infantry.

In March 1944, he was sent to London where he was in charge of radio operations and interception of German messages. He was also responsible for communications with the French resistance, particularly the FFI.

On June 6, 1944, Mr. Waitzman was sent to the 115th Infantry Regiment as a radio operator. He then took part in the storming of Omaha Beach and the liberation of Saint-Lô.

In August 1944, Mr. Waitzman was transferred to the French army commanded by General LECLERC and participated in the liberation of Paris. Upon return to the 115th Infantry Regiment, he took part in the Battle of Ardennes before crossing the Rhin on into Germany.

Mr. Waitzman and his unit also helped liberate the work and concentration camp, Dora Mittelbau.

He was decorated with the Bronze Star for his participation in combats during the French and European Theater Operations. He was also awarded the Medal of Jubilee and a certificate of thanks from the state of Illinois for his participation in World War II.

#### **Private First Class Lewis J. Baldwin**

Lewis J. Baldwin entered active duty with the army on December 16, 1942. Integrated into the Canon Company of the 38th Infantry Regiment as an artilleryman, he participated with his unit in the storming of the beaches of Normandy at Omaha Beach between June 6 and 7, 1944.

His regiment continued combats in Saint-Lô and also fought in the battle of Brest before moving on to Belgium and Germany. His missions included loading ammunition in light artillery for firing, night patrol, and recuperating the wounded and the dead.

During his campaigns, Mr. Baldwin was injured in the right leg, for which he was decorated with the Purple Heart.

#### **Private First Class Marion J. Nesmith**

After undergoing training in various army bases around the U.S. with the 176th Regiment of the 29th Infantry Division, Mr. Marion J. Nesmith was transferred to the Company C of the 429th Regiment in the 83rd Infantry Division.

Mr. Nesmith joined on the European Theater Operations on June 27, 1944. He landed on Omaha Beach a few weeks after D-Day and fought in Normandy. On August 7, 1944, he was gravely injured in the leg near Saint-Malo by a flying mortar that also took the lives of 32 men, wounding many others. First cared for in a surgical unit in France, he was later transferred to England.

For his wounds received as a result of enemy action, Mr. Nesmith was awarded the Purple Heart.

#### **Private First Class Stanley E Richardson**

Stanley E. Richardson joined the army on August 14, 1944 at the age of 18. As a rifleman, he was assigned to the 3rd Battalion of the 180th Regiment in the 45th Infantry Division. His outfit was known as the "Thunderbirds".

Mr. Richardson landed in Le Havre in January 1945. He fought on French territory in Moselle and then continued his mission to Germany. During his time there, he and a fellow soldier were assigned to capture a German machine gun emplacement that was firing on them. They were able to sneak up on the gunner and his assistant and take them out. This heroic act earned him a Bronze Star Medal.

He was also decorated with a Purple Heart for an injury received to the head.

#### **Private First Class Mr. Eddie J. Sessions**

Mr. Eddie J. Sessions joined the Armed forces on December 31, 1943. In October 1944 he left for the European Theater Operations and in November 1944 he joined the 95th Infantry Division that was posted in the east of France.

Mr. Sessions and his unit fought in the city of Metz where they were met with strong resistance from the German defence. The city was finally liberated on November 22, 1944.

Following the defence of Metz, the 95th Infantry Division, nicknamed "Iron Men" continued active combat further East in the city of Boulay. They then went on to enter German territory at the end of November 1944.

After an injury on November 29, 1944, Mr. Sessions was evacuated to England and later transferred to the 8th Air Force. He was decorated with a Purple Heart as well as the World War II Victory medal and the Good Conduct Medal.

#### **Private First Class James C. Austin**

Mr. James C. Austin enlisted in the U.S. Navy on July 16, 1943. After an intensive training, he was sent on the European theatre operations as a pharmacist's mate 2nd Class.

On April 28, 1944, he participated in Exercise "Tiger" which was meant to be a full dress rehearsal for the future allied landing in Normandy. This operation, which occurred along the English coast, turned cataclysmic when 9 German torpedo boats patrolling in the sector attacked the American soldiers, taking the lives of 749 victims and injuring 89. Mr. Austin tirelessly helped care for the wounded and was given the nickname "Morphine Flow".

On June 6, 1944, Mr. Austin participated in D-Day aboard the battleship LST-57. He was a part of a medical division nicknamed "Foxy 29" made up of 22 men, including 2 doctors. That day, he and his unit made 40 round trips between Utah Beach and England in order to repatriate the wounded.



Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are privileged to be surrounded by so many heroes who fought for the liberation of France and Europe, and we cannot praise these men enough for all they have done. As we celebrate their heroism today, let us not forget that, we too, have a duty to fulfil : to keep the memory of their utmost courage alive for generations to come.

Dear Veterans,

You are true heroes. You will be our heroes forever. We the French, we

will never forget what you did to restore our freedom. And today, we also remember the ultimate sacrifice of so many of your comrades who rest on French soil. They will remain forever in our hearts.

Your example gives us inspiration for the future and we are trying to prove ourselves worthy of your legacy in defending our shared values.

In recognition of your extraordinary achievements and untiring efforts in the line of duty, the President of the French Republic François Hollande has chosen to award you with the rank of Knight in the Legion of Honor. It is with great pleasure that I will now present you with this distinguished award, France's highest honor and one of the most coveted in the world.

*Au nom du Président de la République et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur.*

