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French Consul General Visits Lamorinda, Pays Tribute to Veterans of Normandy

By Laurie Snyder



Three Normandy veterans swap stories. From left: Leonard Snyder (Orinda), Warren Jensen (Concord), and Bill Armstrong (Walnut Creek). Photo Ohlen Alexander

honoring those who helped end Hitler's reign of terror. Joined by Bill Cooper, Scoutmaster Emeritus of Orinda Boy Scout Troop 237 who organized the event with help from Scouting authorities and VFW Post 8063 (Lafayette), Carmona saluted 14 East Bay residents who fought in the June 6, 1944 Allied invasion of Normandy: Leonard Snyder and Richard Hersey (Orinda); Hilbert Seiwert (Lafayette); Benny Jordan (Moraga); Bob Hitchcock (Benicia); Jake Larson (Martinez); Bill Armstrong, Daniel Franklin, Chuck Sapper, Bob Tharratt, Herbert Smith (Walnut Creek); and Lynn Freeman, Warren Jensen and Earl Mortenson (Concord).

"Far from being weakened by the vicissitudes of history," noted Carmona, "the state of the friendship and the alliance between France and the U.S. is very strong" - bolstered by the belief of their citizenry in freedom and democracy. "People of my generation were allowed to grow up in a free country," she said, because American soldiers came by the thousands 70 years ago to help save her nation, freeing Paris on Aug. 25, 1944.

Many of the 3 million troops liberating France during Operation Overlord were former Scouts, including Medal of Honor winner Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, the only general to land during D-Day's first wave, and Colonel James Rudder, commander of the Army's 2nd Rangers which suffered a 50 percent-plus casualty rate as men scaled 100-foot cliffs and attacked the Nazi artillery at Pointe Du Hoc. A full 75 percent of the medals awarded for World War II heroism overall were in fact pinned to the chests of former Scouts, according to a 2008 speech by Vice Admiral Richard Gallagher, former deputy commander of the U.S. European Command (now U.S. Navy, ret.).

Yet most of Normandy vets recognized by Carmona and Smith still believe they were just regular guys doing the jobs they were assigned to do - that the real heroes are those who fell in the mud and snow on Europe's fields of honor.

Carmona respectfully disagreed during a follow-up conversation. Each one was a hero, and is genuinely beloved by the people of France. Formerly the Deputy Consul General of Hong Kong, Carmona is the first woman Consul General of France in San Francisco, the only woman in the

"We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields and in the streets. We shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender." - Winston Churchill

When British Prime Minister Winston Churchill uttered those words before the House of Commons in 1941, he knew the world was in for a long, difficult fight. The "War to End All Wars" (World War I) had left behind the dormant seeds of despair, waiting for the wrong gardener to cultivate them into fields of hatred and horror. Less than a decade later, Adolph Hitler appointed himself for the job. By World War II's end, 25 million men, women and children had been wounded with more than 50 million killed. Many were soldiers; many more were innocent civilians.

On Feb. 2, Pauline Carmona, Consul General of France in San Francisco and Orinda Vice-Mayor Victoria Smith reminded listeners just how close the world came to oblivion as they led a special ceremony at the Orinda Community Church

French consular network in the United States, and is also the granddaughter of an Egyptian resident who joined the second D-Day in the south of France. As a child, she and her father, a historian, made the roughly three-hour trip from their Paris home to walk the Normandy and Omaha beaches. "With hindsight, we realize that if the Americans had not helped us at that time, we would probably still be under Nazi rule. All of the people from Jewish origin would have been eradicated. France and Europe would have been completely different."

Smith concurs. She and her husband, longtime Boy Scout Wick Smith, and one of their two Eagle Scout sons have also visited Normandy and its environs. As she read the city council proclamation lauding the veterans, the normally no-nonsense official paused four times to compose herself. "When you see what these gentlemen experienced ... when you see how the artillery rained down upon them" from the Nazi bunkers high above and how the Allied planes were shot at from the ground, only then can you fully appreciate the "enormous sacrifice and enormous courage" of "the surviving heroes in our midst."

Do You Know a Veteran Who Is Deserving of Recognition?

If someone you know has an interesting story to tell about his or her military service, contact the Lamorinda Weekly: storydesk@lamorindaweekly.com. More specifically, if you hear of veterans who took part in the liberation of France, please call the Consulate General of France in San Francisco: (415) 616-4903.



Taxis to Hell and Back: American soldiers head from a Coast Guard landing barge toward the Normandy beach on D-Day, June 6, 1944. Photo Public domain, U.S. Library of Congress, Robert F. Sargent



Pauline Carmona, Consul General of France in San Francisco, speaks with Normandy Veteran, Warren Jensen (Concord), after the medal ceremony in Orinda Feb. 2. (Note the Purple Heart on Jensen's chest.) Photo Ohlen Alexander

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