

France Thanks Veterans

Just over 62 years ago, on June 6, the English Channel on Omaha Beach ran red with the blood of American soldiers. Although they now walk in a slightly slower pace with stooped backs and they haven't heard a drill sergeant or the horrible sounds of war since they landed in Normandy, they know they are heroes, each and every one. It's been 62 years since these brave men and women fought the battles of WWII, and they are the actual history we now read about in history books. Collier County has one of the highest numbers of surviving World War II veterans in the United States, and that number is decreasing dramatically every day. The Collier County Veteran's Council, L'Union des Francais de l'Etranger de Naples and the French American Chamber of Commerce L' Alliance of Francaise de Bonita Springs recently hosted the "Thank you America" luncheon at the Royal Wood Country Club in Naples.

With a lunch menu consisting of French country pate, Chicken Normandy with apples, green beans and rice, Mr. Philippe Vinogradoff, Consul General of France in Miami and Retired Captain of the U.S. Army James Elson, President of the Collier

County Veterans Association, presented the awards to veterans. These history makers 22 in all, some now walking with canes and walkers, stood tall to accept their certificates.

Former Ambassador of France to the United States, H.E. Francois Bujon de l'Estang had informed former Secretary of Veterans Affairs, The Honorable Hershel W. Gober, that the French authorities would be issuing certificates to recognize the participation of all American and allied soldiers who took part in the Normandy landing, and contributed to the liberation of France.

The certificate is meant to express the gratitude of the French people to the soldiers who participated in the Normandy landing on French territory. waters and airspace between June 6, 1944 and May 8, 1945. The ten Consuls General of France in the United States issued the documents on behalf of the French authorities. This was done in coordination with State Veterans Affairs offices, Veterans Service organization's national and states representatives and Veterans associations.

In each of the fifty states, representatives and Veterans Associations went through the tedious process of identifying the eligible veterans, reviewing and certifying the applications and preparing and organizing the ceremonies. In Naples, the Collier County Veterans Council and l'Union des Francais de l' Etranger worked tirelessly on this ceremony.

With tables decorated a festive red, white and blue and balloons reaching toward the sky, it was a celebration of freedom. Naples Mayor Bill Barnett spoke at the opening ceremonies. "The lesson learned today is that our children must never forget," stated Barnett. "It is not very often that you get to meet history."

They were from the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines. They jumped from planes into battle, raced to the bloody shores from ships and dropped bombs, but they all had stories to tell. Like Bedford Biles, attending the celebration with his wife, Fay. Biles was with the 101st Screaming Eagles, he was severely wounded three times and has three purple hearts to show for it. He is now 85 years young and exercises religiously each day, saying he wants to keep in his jumping shape.



Peter Thomas, Purple Heart holder and the narrator of the TV show Forensic Files, talks with Kate Nolan, an Army nurse with the 53rd Field Hospital who saw five battles.