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Saluting the heroes among us

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Last Thursday, in the final stretch of the French presidential election — one that held great significance for Europe and the world — a ceremony was taking place in South Florida that may have been an even more telling symbol of France's democratic roots and a reminder that the very act of casting a ballot is a privilege.

As the presidential candidates rallied supporters from Bayeux to Bordeaux, a much different scene unfolded in Boynton Beach.



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It was there, in an unassuming room carrying an air of modesty matched only by the day's honorees, that the French government's Florida Consulate turned a blind eye to politics to recognize the courage and sacrifice of 23 men who risked their lives defending Western Europe against German occupation.

The ceremony was part of an ongoing initiative by France aimed at honoring the brave men and women who waged war on French soil during World War II with the country's highest military accolade: induction into the nation's Legion of Honor.

Twenty-two Americans and one Briton listened as Consul General Gaël de Maisonneuve read aloud their names, military rank and a summary of their tour of duty in Europe. The biographies read like a brief history of the war's western theater.

Veterans of the Normandy invasion, the Battle of the Bulge and the Battle of the Rhine sat shoulder to shoulder in the front row, saluting their comrades as they received their medals and became France's newest knights.

The program, launched in 2004 to mark the 60th anniversary of D-Day, has since recognized several hundred veterans, with more than 250 honorees in Florida last year.



Irving Whitman, right, is honored for his bravery at the Battle of the Bulge.

My 91-year-old grandfather, Irving Whitman, was among the inductees at the Boynton Beach service.

Sixty-eight years ago, my grandfather and his fellow troops in the First U.S. Army disembarked the RMS Aquitania in Greenock, Scotland to begin preparations for the D-Day invasion.

Months later, he would be among the 150,000-plus Allied troops to cross the English Channel and land at Normandy on June 6, 1944. The next six months saw him and his colleagues push north through the French countryside toward the border of Belgium, where he joined the Third Army and entered battle again under the direction of General George S. Patton.

This time it was the Germans playing aggressor, launching a surprise attack on Allied forces in the Ardennes region. The Battle of the Bulge, as it came to be known, would go down as the largest and bloodiest clash involving the United States during World War II, claiming nearly 90,000 American casualties.

Today, when asked to reflect on the five weeks he spent enduring frigid temperatures amid the endless sea of carnage that defined the Bulge, my grandfather can only muster the word "Hell."

From there, his unit advanced toward Weimar, Germany, where it would liberate the Buchenwald concentration camp. "Hell" is not a strong enough word to describe the atrocities he witnessed at Buchenwald; he remains largely silent when the topic comes up today.

When the war ended and my grandfather arrived home in New Jersey, he returned to work as a chemist formulating printing inks the very next day — casting aside ticker-tape parades and homecoming parties in favor of spending time with his wife and getting to know his 22-month-old daughter, who was born while he was away.

In reminiscing about his service, my grandfather begins and ends his stories with passionate disclaimers that pay tribute to his fellow troops, putting an exclamation point on the fact that he

wasn't alone on the sands of Normandy and in the trenches of Bastogne.

He was no hero, but rather one link in a band of brothers, he explains.

Society as a whole tends to award the "hero" label loosely. Athletes perform "heroic" feats. Politicians cast "heroic" votes. Celebrities undertake "heroic" humanitarian projects.

France's efforts to identify and decorate World War II veterans who risked everything in the name of helping good triumph over evil — even today, decades later — is a fitting reminder that there are true heroes among us.

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