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Orinda Vet Receives Highest French Military Honor

Patrick Byrne is Knight of French Legion of Honor

By Diane Claytor



Counsel General of France Pauline Carmona congratulates Patrick Byrne as he receives the Legion of Honor Medal during the Jan. 20 ceremony. Photos © Consulate General of France in San Francisco

Most people, as they enjoy their golden years, likely believe that their major accomplishments are behind them. But longtime Orinda resident Patrick Byrne is not like most people.

At 91, Byrne, a widower, still lives independently in the same house he has for over 40 years. He still drives. He's active and sharp. And he has a keen sense of humor. Last December, when Byrne received a letter from Pauline Carmona, Counsel General of France, he was overwhelmed. "I have the honor to send you my warmest congratulations on ... your nomination as a Chevalier (Knight) of the Legion of Honor, by a decree signed by the President of the French Republic ...," the letter read. "I was so honored when I saw that the

president of France nominated me," Byrne proudly stated. This extremely prestigious award is in addition to the Good Conduct Medal and four Bronze Stars Byrne previously had received.

The French Legion of Honor, which is similar to the U.S. Congressional Medal of Honor, is an order of distinction established by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802. It is the highest military honor bestowed in France and is given to veterans who fought on French territory and risked their lives to defend and preserve the independence of France. Byrne is in excellent company; other American recipients of the Legion of Honor medal include general and President Dwight Eisenhower, generals Douglas MacArthur and George Patton and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel.

In 1941, several days before his 18th birthday, Byrne, living in Connecticut but originally from Dublin, Ireland, enlisted in the Navy. He attended Naval Radio School before being assigned to serve as a radar technician second-class aboard the USS Augusta, a Navy flagship. In August 1941, the USS Augusta hosted the Atlantic Conference between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill; young Byrne was onboard at the time and was incredibly honored to see these two men.

On June 6, 1944, with Gen. Omar Bradley commanding D-Day landing forces from the bridge, the Augusta turned her guns on the shores of Omaha Beach in Normandy, France. The fight came to be known as the largest seaborne invasion in history as well as the beginning of the end of World War II. Thousands of troops were wounded during this invasion and, unfortunately, Byrne was one of those critically injured. He was transported off the ship and spent the next six months recuperating at the U.S. Naval Hospital in Philadelphia before being honorably discharged.

Byrne does not talk much about his military service, and he cer-

tainly does not talk about combat. "I saw too many bodies floating in the water and out of respect for them and all the others who didn't survive, I don't talk about it," he said. He did say that when you "hear the phrase, 'man your battle stations,' you know what you're facing, you know you're going into aggressive mode."

Following his service industry discharge, Byrne moved to California. "I had a senior officer that I really admired," Byrne noted. "He had graduated from Cal so I decided that I, too, wanted to go there." Byrne went on to work for Motorola, returned to school for a master's degree and became a college-level computer programming instructor.

On Jan. 20, Byrne, along with friends and family, traveled to the French consulate in San Francisco. There, flanked by two of his grandchildren, he stood and proudly listened as Counsel General Carmona, pinning the medal on him, said, "Today we celebrate a hero whose courage, faith and dedication contributed, more than 70 years ago, to defend and preserve the independence of France and to save our common values: freedom, tolerance, democracy It is almost impossible for us to imagine how much courage and bravery it must have required ... to fight as you did ... your courage and bravery are precisely the reason why the president of the French Republic has decided to award you this highest French recognition."

The accolades continued. The city of Orinda honored Byrne by officially recognizing him at its Feb. 16 City Council meeting. Council members and those in the audience gave Byrne a standing ovation as Mayor Victoria Smith presented him with a Certificate of Recognition for being the recipient of the Legion of Honor award, calling it a "small token of our appreciation." She added that the City of Orinda joined both the United States and France in their gratitude for his service.



Orinda's Patrick Byrne, wearing his Legion of Honor Medal, with Counsel General of France Pauline Carmona, right, is surrounded by family and friends following the presentation ceremony.

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