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Catharine Young

Olean World War II Veterans John Capito and William Zuckerman Receive Honors from French Republic

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Veterans Receive Awards for Service in Liberation of France

OLEAN – Nearly 70 years after the liberation of France, two Olean veterans have received awards from the French Republic for their part in the defeat of Nazi Germany.

During a ceremony at her office in Olean on Armed Forces Day, May 17, Senator Catharine Young (R,C,I – Olean) joined Mr. Pascal Soares, Honorary French Consul of New York, in presenting medals to U.S. Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class John P. Capito and U.S. Army Staff Sgt. William Zuckerman in recognition of their outstanding service.

Since 1802, the National Order of the Legion of Honor has been France's highest award and is one of the most prestigious distinctions in the world. Appointment to the Order is awarded by the President of France for excellent civil or military conduct, as confirmed after official investigation by the French government. Not limited to French citizens alone, appointment may also be conferred upon American World War II veterans who fought to liberate France from the occupation of Nazi Germany.

After being contacted by the families of Petty Officer 3rd Class Capito and Staff Sgt. Zuckerman, Senator Young worked to ensure that both men obtained these well-deserved awards.

“Those who answered the call of service during World War II deserve our deepest gratitude and thanks. Sadly, the ranks of those World War II veterans still with us are

dwindling every year, so it is immensely important that we express our thanks and gratitude now. We are very fortunate to have these two World War II heroes right here in Olean,” said Senator Young.

Reflecting on the honor, Petty Officer 3rd Class Capito stressed that the award should go to all of his brothers in arms. “This is not all my doing,” he said. “I really need to give credit to all of my shipmates who were with me, many of whom didn’t make it back from Anzio,” he said, referring to the Battle of Anzio on January 24, 1944, where his ship sustained heavy fire.

“I just thank Cathy Young and the staff who did all this for me,” said Petty Officer 3rd Class Capito.

Staff Sgt. Zuckerman also reflected on his experiences during the war and extended his thanks.

“I want to thank the French government and also Senator Young for everything she’s done to help. I’m thankful for the men I served with and for the fact that we’re celebrating the end of World War II,” he said.

“The people that I was really honored to serve with during the war were the paratroopers. The way they went up and made their jumps with the Germans shooting at them always really impressed me,” said Staff Sgt. Zuckerman.

John P. Capito was born in Delanov, Italy, on January 9, 1923, and came to the United States when he was just three years old.

He was working for Thatcher’s Manufacturing Co. in Olean when he was drafted into the U.S. Navy on May 25, 1943. Seaman Capito entered recruit training days later at Sampson Naval Training Center in Lake Seneca, New York.

After completing his signalman and quartermaster training, he was assigned to the USS Plunkett (DD 431), a Gleaves-class destroyer. At that point in the war, Plunkett was assigned to hunter-killer, anti-submarine, and convoy escort operations in the North Atlantic.

During the assault landing at Anzio, Italy, in January 1944, Petty Officer 3rd Class Capito and the USS Plunkett fought in support of the invasion, with the ship’s crew acting heroically during the fierce 17 minute battle. With the ship under attack by German aircraft and glider bombs, it maneuvered radically, shot down two of the attacking aircraft, and continued to fight off others as a 550 pound bomb crashed into a one-inch gun platform. The ship’s crew performed gallantly under attack. Although undermanned and severely damaged, all onboard fires were extinguished and the ship left the combat area on one engine to make temporary repairs.

After full repairs were made in New York, Petty Officer 3rd Class Capito and the ship returned to the European Theater to join the armada staging for the invasion of France. On D-Day, June 6, 1944, he participated in the historic attack as the USS Plunkett screened transports and provided shore bombardment off Omaha Beach.

After the war, Petty Officer 3rd Class Capito returned to the United States and was honorably discharged on February 1, 1946. He served two years, eight months and seven days in the U.S. Navy, most of that time at sea aboard the USS Plunkett.

William Zuckerman was born in Akron, Ohio, on May 2, 1922, the son of Gary and Dora Zuckerman. The family later relocated to Olean where he graduated from Olean High School in 1940.

He enlisted in the U.S. Army on October 13, 1942, at Fort Niagara and was sent to Keesler Army Air Field in Gulfport, Mississippi, for aircraft engine mechanics school.

Following training as a C-47 engine mechanic with the 1st Troop Carrier Command, Air Transport Service, at Stout Army Air Field in Indiana, Staff Sgt. Zuckerman departed for the war in Europe in September 1943. Once there, he was based in England with the 9th Air Force.

Staff Sgt. Zuckerman was later assigned to the 27th Air Transport Group, European Air Transport Service, part of the 302nd Air Transport Wing, and went to Le Bourget airfield in Paris. With the 27th ATG, Staff Sgt. Zuckerman supported the 8th and 9th Air Forces with ferry and transport services, worked on DC-3 aircraft, and performed a broad range of duties, including resupplying frontline units, performing field repairs, and recovering disabled American aircraft. The 27th also assisted with medical evacuation, transportation of VIPs, and many other missions.

Staff Sgt. Zuckerman even worked on the B-17 of decorated French General Marie-Pierre Kœnig, the Governor General of Paris, for three weeks.

Among the 27th ATG's perilous missions, they supported General Patton's drive across Europe by hauling gasoline to the front lines, an extremely hazardous undertaking.

While with the 27th ATG, Staff Sgt. Zuckerman participated in the Ardennes, Central Europe, Northern France, and Rhineland campaigns.

Just before D-Day, Staff Sgt. Zuckerman was wounded in both legs by shrapnel from a V-2 rocket during an attack on his base in England. He recovered just in time to play a part in the momentous D-Day invasion at Normandy.

"I went back to work on the 5th of June, and the next day was the invasion of Normandy. I flew over on the fifth day after the invasion, and we were within gunshot fire of the Germans, but we didn't stay long. We unloaded our medical

supplies, picked up some wounded, and took off. That was an experience,” he said.

Staff Sgt. Zuckerman described many of his other memories from the war.

“Before the Battle of Bulge, we were at Étain, France, and I had the privilege of being there when General Patton landed for a meeting with six other generals. I checked his airplane, and he came over and spoke to us. He was a very nice man. We stood at attention, but he said we didn’t have to. We talked and he asked me if I would join his crew and help take care of his airplane. I was honored but shocked. I said, ‘Sorry General but I have a crew here. We work together, and we have a lot of work to do to get these airplanes out.’ He said, ‘I understand. I wouldn’t leave my men either.’ That was one of the things I will always remember,” said Staff Sgt. Zuckerman.

Later, on Christmas Eve 1944, Staff Sgt. Zuckerman’s 27th ATG flew a special, all-out mission to transport reinforcements from Marseille to the very front lines of the Battle of the Bulge – an operation that involved over 100 aircraft. Staff Sgt. Zuckerman and other elements of the 27th also participated in a secret mission to Sweden to support Norwegian underground forces.

Another experience involved a chance meeting with a tank destroyer in Nice, France.

“Two days after the war in Europe ended I was in Nice, France. I was walking around and tapped a fella on the shoulder. He was in uniform, so I asked him what outfit he belonged to. He looked at me and said, ‘You’re my brother.’ I hadn’t seen my brother Oscar in three years. He had been on the front lines and walked across Europe. By then he was over 50 pounds lighter than when I last saw him. I didn’t even recognize him at first,” said Staff Sgt. Zuckerman.

“Then in Paris I ran into a number of people from Olean,” he continued.

Staff Sgt. Zuckerman returned to the United States on December 20, 1945, having completing three years, two months, and 15 days of active duty – two years, three months, and 16 days of which were spent overseas.

Following his Army Air Forces service, Staff Sgt. Zuckerman had a very successful four-decade long career as a businessman. He was sole owner of Zuckerman Brothers, a processor of non-ferrous and precious metals; vice president and founder of Southern Tier Chemical Corp.; president and majority owner of Olean Stamping and Machine Co.; president of Washington Jewelers of Scottsdale, Arizona; and owner of Southeastern Transmission in Olean for 12 years.

Both Petty Officer 3rd Class Capito and Staff Sgt. Zuckerman have already received numerous prestigious medals in recognition of their service.

Petty Officer 3rd Class Capito has been awarded the Combat Action Ribbon, the Navy Unit Commendation Ribbon, the American Theater Campaign Medal, the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with four bronze service star devices, the Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal, the World War II Victory Medal, the Navy Occupation Service Medal with Asia Clasp, the Honorable Service Lapel Button, and the U.S. Navy Discharge Button.

Staff Sgt. Zuckerman has earned the Good Conduct Medal, the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal, the World War II Victory Medal, and the New York State Medal for Merit.

“We will never forget you,” said Mr. Pascal Soares, Honorary French Consul of New York, as he expressed his nation’s gratitude for the service of the American World War II veterans.

“These two men exemplify the heroism of our veterans. We owe them more than these awards could ever express. In bravely fighting to defeat fascism and liberate Europe, they have earned the profound appreciation of not just their fellow Americans, but also of the nation of France and millions around the world,” said Senator Young.

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