Why Local GI Was Made A French Knight

By: Markus Krueger

Last September Conrad Newgren received a letter from the French embassy. It informed him that he had been made a Knight of the Legion of Honor. This is France’s highest award, the equivalent to our nation’s Medal of Honor. The letter said, in part;

“My fellow countrymen will never forget your sacrifice. Their children and grandchildren are as proud of your courageous actions as can be your own children and grandchildren.

This outstanding distinction is the highest honor that France can bestow upon those who have achieved remarkable deeds for France. It is also a sign of true gratitude for your invaluable contribution to the liberation of France during these difficult times in the history of our nation.”

What did he do to deserve such an award? Plenty. Since Conrad Newgren is a member of the Historical Society and a regular visitor to the Hjemkomst Center, he agreed to share his stories with his friends here at the museum.

Conrad Newgren grew up in The Point, an old Moorhead neighborhood that is now the park surrounding the Hjemkomst Center. He was drafted as a combat engineer in 1943, just after his 18th birthday. As a combat engineer, Conrad was taught how to string barbed wire, how to strengthen defensive lines, how to locate and diffuse land mines, how to blow things up, how to build a defensive line, how to string barbed wire, how to blow things up, how to locate and diffuse land mines, how to build a defensive line, how to string barbed wire, how to blow things up, how to locate and diffuse land mines, how to build a defensive line.

The mosquitoes carried malaria. The main body of the Third Infantry bypassed the Maginot Line.

In August of 1944, Conrad Newgren participated in Operation Dragoon, the second and less famous Allied invasion of France. At that time, the German Army was taking horrific casualties trying to slow the Russian advance in Poland. They were struggling to keep the American and British troops bottled up in the hedgerows of Normandy, and they were holding their own in the rugged mountains of northern Italy.

Conrad Newgren and 151,000 other American and Free French troops landing on the Mediterranean coast of France was more than Hitler could handle. Newgren remembers little German resistance when he landed at San Tropez, and the Allies moved quickly across the French Riviera. The closer the Germans got to their Fatherland, however, the stiffer their German resistance became.

The Allied advance was slowed in France’s Vosges Mountains. These mountains were the last great defensible positions before the Rhine River. On the other side of the Rhine was Germany. The Nazis’ backs were to the wall, and they fought accordingly.

In addition to the rugged terrain, the GIs had to fight their way through the Maginot Line (pronounced MAZH-i-no). The French built this line of modern fortress complexes after the First World War to be a wall that would stop any German invasion in its tracks.

Unfortunately for the French, the Germans simply went around it when they invaded in 1940. Although the line was built to stop a German invasion, the Nazis had four years to turn the Maginot Line’s defenses around and use them to protect Germany.

The main body of the Third Infantry bypassed the Maginot Line.

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Conrad Newgren in Chicago after returning to the United States in 1946.

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