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# 'I'm the Lucky One,' Says Warrior of Omaha Beach

"I don't think of me. I think of all those graves and the guys blown to hell," says Charlestown resident who will be named a "Chevalier," or knight, in French Legion of Honor Monday.

Posted by [Jennifer Donatelli](#) (Editor) , January 26, 2014 at 05:09 PM

1

2

5

63

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Harper Griswold, a "Chevalier" of the Legion of...



0:00 / 6:35



On June 6, 1944, Harper Griswold was just 18 and a recently commissioned Petty Officer, Second Class in the U.S. Navy.

The HMS Ceres, the ship to which he was stationed, was tasked as a command for fleet shuttle control, which meant ferrying supplies to ships in the Normandy invasion of D Day. When the Ceres arrived at Omaha Beach in the mid-morning, the smoke from other ships bombarding the Nazi forces was so thick, Griswold and his fellow officers could barely see, he recalled.

"I guess it was over 4,000 ships in the invasion area. There were ships as far as you could see," Griswold, now 88, recalled. "I think I was young enough that I didn't know the magnitude of what was happening. We had a job to do and weren't thinking beyond that."

The memories of his service in World War II are as fresh as if it were yesterday for the resident

of the Charlestown Retirement Community, who has a binder full of papers from those years and wears a hat from the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 219.

The recognition from the French government for his service Griswold applied for five years ago finally will come Monday when he is named a "Chevalier," or knight in the Legion of Honor. He is the latest of four residents at Charlestown to have received the honor.

The French government bestows the honor on American veterans who fought in France during World War II as a way of thanking them for their service and to show their solidarity with the United States, Dana Purcarescu, a spokesperson for the French Embassy in the United States, wrote in an email. The Legion of Honor is the highest decoration in France and was established by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802.

"Through the decorating ceremony, not only do we pay tribute to the courage and dedication of those very young people at the time of their engagement, but we also hope to help educate the young generation," Purcarescu wrote. "The veterans' stories are a lesson in history and civic engagement, which we are proud to share with a group of French students, traveling from Normandy, but also with the veterans' families, in particular, grandchildren."

It's unclear how many veterans have received the honor. Purcarescu declined to provide figures, saying the French didn't want to minimize the significance of the award.

Griswold said he is happy about the recognition but feels he played only a small part in the war effort. When he considers the honor, he thinks of the trip he made to Cherbourg, France, for the 50th anniversary of D Day and all the graves he saw.

"I don't think of me. I think of all those graves and the guys blown to hell," he said. "I was an insignificant youngster doing my job. All the respect and honor goes to those guys, and I hope we never forget them."

As a 17-year-old about to turn 18, Griswold knew he would be drafted and he wanted to avoid serving in the infantry after listening to his father tell stories about mustard gas while serving in the trenches during World War I. He decided he wanted some control over where he would go, so he signed up for the Navy.

Griswold said luck played a large part in getting him through some difficult times during his service. As a third class petty officer stationed in Falmouth, England, he heard about a test to advance to second class petty officer. Eight others were competing with him in the test for the one spot.

Something told Griswold to study the night before, so he crammed, just like a college student. He passed the exam, secured the new rank and was sent out on his new assignment.

A month later, he heard the Germans had taken control of his old ship. One of his friends was held as a prisoner of war for the duration of the war and subsisted on potato peelings and grass soup.

"If I hadn't studied, I would have been on that boat with my friend. That's one thing I can look back on and say the good Lord was with me," Griswold recalled.

After the invasion, Griswold and his fellow officers stayed in Cherbourg until 1945, when they

returned to America.

In the years since the war, the Connecticut native worked as a landscape architect for several companies, eventually landing in Texas, where he met his wife, Katherine. The Griswolds moved back to her home state of Maryland to care for her ailing relatives and have remained ever since. They were married for 40 years before she died in 1998; they had a son, Scott, and a daughter, Leah.

Griswold said he is looking forward to Monday's ceremony after speaking with another veteran at Charlestown who previously received the honor.

"He said the French come out with all their uniforms. It's going to be quite an affair from the sounds of it," he said, adding he's the youngest of the veterans at Charlestown to be honored. "I'm a young antique. I feel in my mind, I'm the lucky one."

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**John Patrick Mickanis** January 26, 2014 at 06:06 PM

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