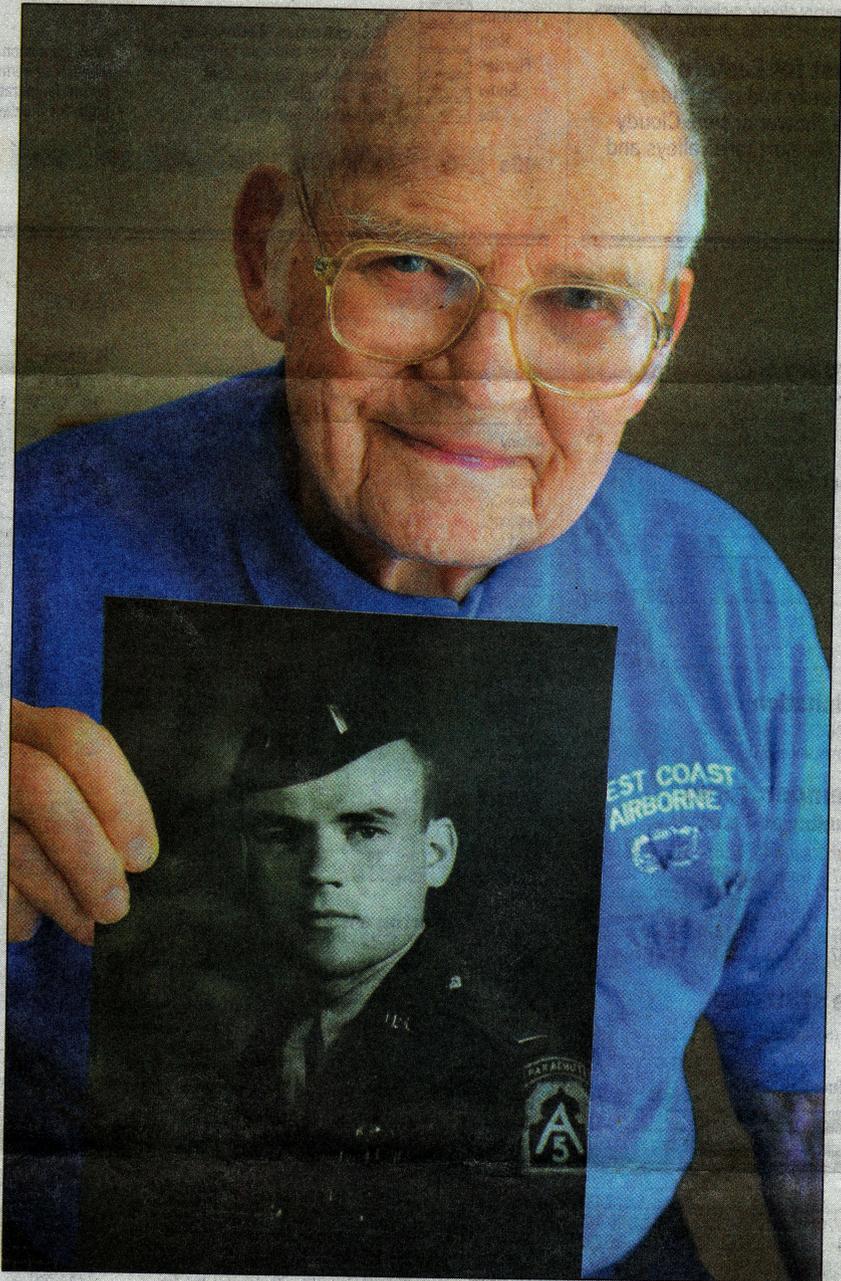


France will bestow highest military honor on WWII veteran from Eugene



BRIAN DAVIES/*The Register-Guard*

Mike Reuter holds his wartime photo at his home in Eugene on Tuesday. This month, Reuter, 93, will receive the Legion of Honor for his service in World War II. It's the highest honor presented by France to veterans.

2 nations grateful for service of one

By **DASHIELL PAULSON**
The Register-Guard



Lt. Mike Reuter gets ready in Italy before parachuting into southern France (August 1944).

Edward "Mike" Reuter had to save his platoon. Bullets were bouncing off rocks. One of his scouts had been shot through the arm. Several men were already dead at the bottom of a ravine.

It was 1944, and France was a battlefield. The 509th Parachute Infantry, B Company, 3rd Platoon, had been making its way down a narrow ridge to a castle west of Cannes held by the Germans.

As dawn broke, German snipers on the other side of the ridge began firing. Reuter, a first lieutenant in command of the platoon, ran at them — alone.

Thick brush hid his approach, but at the top of the ridge, "A German with a 'burp gun' opened up." Reuter dropped for cover.

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Veteran: Will be awarded Legion of Honor in ceremony next week

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The burp gun — firing 900 rounds a minute — missed, blowing up dirt all around him. A machine gun opened up to his right. Fifteen feet away, he saw a German stick grenade explode. Reuter tossed his own grenade over the ridge crest.

“After this, I heard no more firing from the Germans,” Reuter recalled. “I think they thought I had some other guys with me.”

The Germans had withdrawn.

When Reuter walked back down the ridge, he could see that the 509 had continued on. He followed their trail to the castle where the battle had already ended.

“Where in the hell have you been?” his commanding officer demanded.

“I got lucky,” Reuter, 93, said 71 years later in a recent interview over coffee in Eugene. “It was impulsive, but I think I saved some of my people from becoming casualties.”

Next week, France will anoint Reuter as a Knight of the Legion of Honor for his contributions to the country’s liberation in the war. The Legion of Honor is the highest award for soldiers serving in France during World War II, and it cannot be awarded posthumously.

During and after his military service, Reuter was awarded the Purple Heart, the Bronze Star and several other distinctions, but “I was quite honored and surprised” about this one.

Reuter was nominated by

KNIGHT OF THE LEGION OF HONOR

What: France’s highest award for soldiers serving in France during World War II; cannot be awarded posthumously

Who: Mike Reuter of Eugene, lieutenant colonel (retired), U.S. Army

When/where: Noon, Wednesday, Veterans’ Memorial Building, 1626 Willamette St.; a representative from the Consulate of France in Portland will make the presentation

509th Parachute Infantry

Association. Dick Norton, a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force and head of the chapter, said Reuter is “a very humble guy” and “very deserving of this award.”

“This is an incredibly high honor from France,” Norton said.

Normally, those who receive the honor are flown to France, but Reuter’s health makes that inadvisable, so a representative from the Consulate of France in Portland will bestow the honor at a ceremony at the Veterans’ Memorial Building in Eugene.

Near the end of the war, the 509th was disbanded because of heavy casualties, particularly during the Battle of the Bulge, where Reuter had been sent to the front in Belgium. His memories of that battle were transcribed for the application sent in by Norton.

“In one situation we were defending a position against an SS unit,” Reuter recalled. “During the fight they fired a multi-barreled rocket launcher...a terrible noise; we called it the ‘screaming meemies.’ After this barrage I looked over to my left and a boy from A com-

pany, about 20 feet away, had lost the top of his head.”

Reuter survived the German guns, but the winter cold was almost as lethal.

“Many of the casualties in Belgium were from frozen feet,” he recounted. “I came across a dead German wearing American overshoes. He didn’t need them and they fit me perfectly. Those overshoes and my British seaman’s scarf saved me from freezing during the next month.”

The Battle of the Bulge, Germany’s last major campaign in the war, lasted 40 days, and at the end Reuter was the last officer alive in B company.

Reuter’s military service began in September 1942 and ended on Christmas Day 1945. He was wounded in a battle at Anzio, Italy, in February 1944.

By his own account, Reuter has had a good life after the war. He and Beverly Ferney were married in 1947, and parented five sons. The two celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary in 2012.

Reuter went to school on the G.I. Bill while continuing on active duty in the Army, and received his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois in 1957.

Earlier, he earned his bachelor’s degree in physical education in 1948 from Washington State University and his master’s degree from the University of Illinois the following year.

Reuter taught physical education and coached varsity wrestling at several universities, including the University of Oregon, from which he retired in 1984.

Nowadays, Reuter likes to build and fly radio-controlled model airplanes. He also spends time playing the clarinet — in not one but two bands — and belongs to the Traditional Jazz Society of Oregon. He and his wife enjoy attending jazz festivals across the Pacific Northwest.

Those pursuits wouldn’t be possible, he knows, if things had turned out differently for him in the war. One of the incidents he remembers best was a parachute jump into France in 1944. “It was a combat jump, and when the green light went on to go, I couldn’t see the ground, so I waited 15 or 20 seconds before ordering my men to jump,” Reuter recalled. “I think if we had jumped on that green light right away, we would have gone into the ocean, along with my company commander and his load.”

“I guess you could say I was lucky to be where I was when I was. But a lot of my friends weren’t very lucky.”

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