

**Speech by H.E. Sylvie Bermann,
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom**

**on the awarding of insignia of the *Légion d'honneur*
to six British veterans**

York, Tuesday 28 April 2015

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'd like to thank the Sheriff of York, John Kenny, the Lord Mayor of York, Ian Gillies, and the Director of the Yorkshire Air Museum, Ian Reed, for allowing us today to organize this event at the Yorkshire Air Museum.

This place reminds us of the shared history between France and the United Kingdom.

Over 2,000 French people lived here in York during the Second World War and contributed to the Allied war effort as engineers, pilots, secretaries and gunners. Within eight months, 216 of them had died in combat, with 41 aircraft never returning, most of them falling from the skies over Germany and on the very soil they were striving so hard to liberate. I pay my respects to their memory. My country's honour remained intact thanks to them, and most notably the French Hurricane pilot Yves Mahé, whom York citizens still celebrate for heroically and decisively intercepting a German bombing raid and saving the city from complete destruction on that dark night of 29 April 1942.

But today we are here to honour the British veterans.

To mark the 70th anniversary of D-Day in Normandy last year, the French government, in agreement with the British authorities, decided to award the *Légion d'honneur* to all the British veterans who took part in the Liberation of France during the Second World War.

The *Légion d'Honneur*, created by Napoléon in 1802, is France's highest distinction and honours exceptional acts of bravery and devotion by all those who have served France, whether they be "French by blood received" or "by blood spilled".

Thirty British veterans were already awarded the distinction in France at the D-Day anniversary. A number of veterans were also decorated by my predecessor on 14 July, France's National Day, and I personally presided over a ceremony on Remembrance Day last year.

Since then, a record number of 2,800 applications have been received in the space of a few months.

I can assure you that the French authorities attach great importance to considering each request, and are looking for ways to speed things up. France will keep its promise, and we will be able to award the majority of these decorations in the coming months.

So I have great pleasure this morning in decorating six veterans who particularly distinguished themselves in the fighting to liberate France.

Through this gesture, France wants to thank them for their total commitment to freedom.

We owe our freedom and security largely to their dedication, because they were ready to risk their lives.

As the French President recalled in Normandy on the 70th anniversary of D-Day: “If today we can live in peace, if we can live in security, if we can enjoy sovereignty, protected by the laws we’ve chosen, it’s thanks to those men who gave their lives. Every moment compels the living to remember those who were killed.”

Today, as we contemplate this heritage and enjoy this Europe of peace, we must think every moment about the heroes of June 1944, about those men who came from across the Atlantic, across the Channel, across the Mediterranean and the Pacific to begin the liberation of Europe by liberating France. As Churchill said, “never in the history of mankind have so many owed so much to so few”.

Gentlemen, I would like now to summarize briefly your outstanding military exploits.

Gerald Eric Briscoe, you enlisted as a sapper in the Royal Engineers, one of the corps supporting the British army. You served in the 295th Army Field Company and put your life on the line in overcoming the huge obstacle of the Atlantic Wall, which was blocking the way for the Allied troops.

Gordon Collinson, you enlisted in the Royal Tank Regiment of the Royal Armoured Corps. You took part in the landing on Gold Beach on 6 June 1944, where your tanks cleared the way through minefields.

James Denwood, you enlisted as a sapper in the Royal Engineers. You took part in the Battle of Normandy and were deployed on Gold Beach on 7 June 1944 to provide fuel for the British and American troops in a logistical operation, unprecedented in scale, to ensure total air supremacy for the Allied forces on land, at sea and in the air.

Eric Gill, you enlisted in the British army's King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry as a corporal, and took part in the Normandy landing on Gold Beach on 6 June 1944, then the bloody fighting in Caen, where the spectre of the First World War and trench warfare returned to haunt "Monty" and his men in the ruins of the deserted city. You also demonstrated bravery in the fighting in Calais, during the strategic taking of Hill 112, and also in Belgium and the Netherlands. Moreover, you were wounded by shrapnel.

Thomas William Wright, as a soldier you enlisted as a radio operator in the British army's Staffordshire Yeomanry. You took part in the landing on Sword Beach on 6 June 1944, alongside your comrades in the heroic Kieffer commando, those 177 Frenchmen who went to liberate France and whose commanding officer was hit twice before reluctantly being evacuated by his men.

Catherine Rush, your husband, Bernard Anthony Rush, was recruited as a chief petty officer in the Royal Navy. On board one of the 12 barges in the 7th Landing Barge Vehicle Flotilla – those veritable floating traps, so vulnerable to enemy fire and yet so crucial in transporting troops and equipment onto our soil – he played a direct role in the tremendous landing operation onto the beaches of Normandy.

Gentlemen, in recognition of your heroic accomplishments for the Liberation of France and of the example of bravery and dedication you offer us, the President of the French Republic has awarded you the *Légion d'Honneur*.