McBurney gets Legion d'Honneur

Times Photo/Ernest A. Brown

Former State Sen. John F. McBurney Jr. of Pawtucket, is awarded the French Legion of Honor, France's highest distinction, by Francois Gauthier, the consul general of France in Boston, during a ceremony in the Governor's State Room at the Statehouse in Providence Friday. Rhode Island General Treasurer Frank Caprio is at center.

Ex-senator given France's top honor for conduct in war

BY ROCHELLE LEFEBVRE
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PROVIDENCE – In a recent news article, former State Sen. John McBurney Jr. was labeled as a hero for the time he served during World War II, but he doesn't consider himself to be and said he "merely followed orders – a witness to heroic acts."

Others consider the nine months he spent in France with the 103rd Division, Seventh Army to be courageous acts of heroism.

On Friday, McBurney, 82, the father of current State Sen. John McBurney III, was formally thanked by local dignitaries in the State Room of the Statehouse for his service. He recieved the Legion d'Honneur, France's highest distinction, bestowed upon him by the Consul General of France in Boston, Francois Gauthier.

Those in attendance who paid tribute to McBurney included: the Rhode Island National Guard's Color Guard, representatives of branches of the U.S. Military, General Treasurer Frank Caprio, Supreme Court Chief Justice Frank Williams, Rev. Bernard Healy, former Gov. Bruce Sundlun and Senate President Joseph Montalbano to name a few.

"We are the fortunate sons and daughters of this greatest generation who saves the world from tyranny and oppression," said Montalbano. "We owe a debt of gratitude to Corporal McBurney and the many men and women like him who, as is inscribed on the national World War II Memorial in Washington, 'endured all and gave all that justice among nations might prevail and that mankind might enjoy freedom and inherit peace.'"

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Montalbano quoted former President Franklin D. Roosevelt in stating, "There is a mysterious cycle in human events - to some generations much is given, of other generations much is expected. This is a generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny."

McBurney was a hero in the defining moment of the 20th Century, said Montalbano.

On October 20, 1944, McBurney landed in Marseilles and proceeded north, encountering heavy resistance throughout his route. He helped to liberate France by participating in heavy fighting in the Vosges Mountains and in the liberation of Saint-Die-des-Vosges, Diefenbach and Selestat during November and December of that year, before proceeding into Germany.

"What I saw in those days, I will never forget," the dying, the dead, and "those who were still alive, I tried to console them as much as I could," said McBurney.

For those acts of heroism, including saving a fellow soldier from execution, he was awarded the Bronze Star with a Bronze Oak Leaf cluster, which will now be joined by the Legion d'Honneur.

Before bestowing the medal on McBurney, Gauthier talked about the importance of making choices.

"Regardless of what may take place today or what choices nations may choose to make, we all owe the ability to make those choices to the sacrifices made by you and your comrades that comprised the armed forces of the allies," Gauthier said. "What happened in those days can be considered as one of the toughest days in World War II - you made sacrifices to liberate my country and France will never forget that.

"You have well deserved our innate gratitude," he said.

Said McBurney, "I feel very humble receiving this award. I'm deeply grateful to the president of France who signed this order for this occasion and the time I spent with the French soldiers in World War II."

Times Photo/Ernest A. Brown

Former State Sen. John F. McBurney Jr. of Pawtucket, left, is congratulated by Attorney General Patrick Lynch in the State Room of the Statehoue in Providence Friday. McBurney was awarded the French Legion of Honor.

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