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France to honor local man for WWII service

By [Daniel Hartill, Staff Writer](#)

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NEW GLOUCESTER — Rene Michaud almost died as he first glimpsed the French coast.

Michaud, then a 24-year-old from Auburn, had joined the allied invasion of France a couple of weeks after D-Day in June 1944. He and his unit of Army artillery soldiers — hoping for their chance to shell the Nazis — nearly sunk in a barge as they approached the French coast. The problem was that too many ships in the Allied fleet had been destroyed close to shore, causing a kind of minefield in the water as they approached the beaches.

"It was raining like the dickens, and we were all standing," said Michaud, who turns 90 next month. "Luckily, we were hanging on to each other because the barge went under the water in one corner. No one got flipped off, so we made it."

It was little better on shore.

"We walked about 5 miles in the rain," he said. "I had a case of chocolate and a case of cigarettes I had bought because they were cheap on the boat, plus my duffle bag, my full pack and rifle."

He spent his first night in France sleeping across the two boxes he'd brought to avoid the pool of water in his little tent.

The next morning, as the rain cleared and his unit met their first French people, Michaud became crucial. He'd spoken French as a boy. Instantly, he became an interpreter.

"The guys all looked to me," Michaud said.

Now, the French are too.

On Nov. 19, the consul general of France is scheduled to award Michaud the French Legion of Honor medal for his service during the war.

The presentation will be made at the Maine Military Museum and Learning Center in South Portland. Some of Michaud's large family — including two sons, a daughter, 10 grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren — plan to attend. At his side will be his wife of 63 years, Rita.



Rene Michaud of New Gloucester said that knowing how to speak French proved to be very useful as his unit marched across France during World War II. Michaud's picture, second from top at right, appears with other soldiers from his unit in the 102nd Infantry Division.

- Daryn Slover/Sun Journal

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"I'm honored," Michaud said a little sheepishly.

The award grew out of a meeting between Michaud's grandson, Robert, and a former consul general.

"I am very blessed to still have my grandfather alive and well, and I am excited about this chance to recognize him for his service," Robert said.

Like so many veterans, Michaud is grateful but a little embarrassed of too much fuss.

In the living room of his log cabin in New Gloucester, Michaud talked about those long-ago days with quiet humor.

He described becoming a part of a now-legendary system of convoys to the front lines, nicknamed "Red Ball Express," simply because someone asked him if he could drive. He endured strafing by German planes and earned a Purple Heart after a German shell exploded a few feet over his head.

The report of the explosive gave him a confounding concussion that sent him to a hospital bed for days.

"The wounds weren't very substantial," he said, describing little cuts on his forearms and hands.

He crossed nearly every big river in Europe: the Rhine, Danube and Elbe. And immediately after the war ended, he saw bits of Russia as he helped evacuate female Soviet prisoners of war to their homes.

But the duty didn't last long. In October, he returned home to Rita. The couple had married while Michaud was training in Texas.

"I was one of the first to come home because I was married," he said.

They are still together. On Dec. 4, they will celebrate 64 years together.

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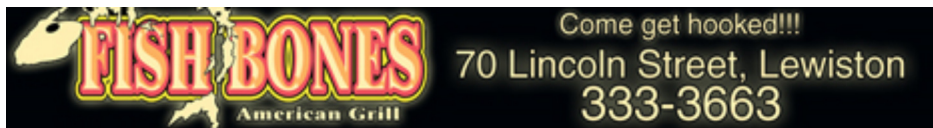
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Things like this concerning our veterans, ALL our veterans, NEED to be done.

The kudo has been given successfully

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