

Speech of Mark Taplin, Charge d’Affaires ad interim - US Embassy, Paris
Merville-Franceville - France - June 7, 2014

It is a real pleasure to join you here today and to be part of this celebration of a pilot and his airplane. Behind them stand – if you look carefully you will see them even today – the tens of thousands of long-departed pilots and dismantled planes they are standing in for, the men and flying machines that helped liberate France and Europe.

Gene Noble – what an appropriate name; it speaks to us in both French and English. Because there was a genuine nobility in what your generation contributed in 1944. I do not mean a romantic version of war; you know better than that. It was tough and it was ugly and it was brutal. You bravely did your duty. You faced harrowing moments that most of us can only imagine, and the loss of many a friend and comrade-in-arms. But what you accomplished was, in the end, truly noble. You gave back to tens of millions of people their lives, their liberty and their pursuit of happiness. Your good works have held for many generations, and will for many more. No one in Normandy this week deserves that decoration more than you do. I am honored to have been able to join you and your family today to see you receive it.

As for your plane – and that is one of the other remarkable things about today’s ceremony – this truly was your plane. The “Snafu Special” has led a remarkable life too. To put it mildly: the word that comes to mind is “rocambolique.” Not a lot of us would be able to limp home with as many bullet and shell holes as she did in her time – then pick herself up to fly again, over and over again. Snafu richly deserves her status as an official historical monument.

Your plane and the C-47s like her that helped win the Second World War were, likewise, an expression of the nobility of an entire generation of Americans, including on the home front. Millions of Americans, from coast to coast, did their regular jobs, then shouldered a second – making possible what became known as “the arsenal of victory.” My own grandfather, a fifty-something school principal, locked up his high school each day, grabbed a sandwich for dinner, and then worked the night shift in a Pittsburgh steel mill to help make sure there were enough Sherman tanks to clear the way through Normandy.

The C-47s like Snafu Special were the fruit of the extraordinary labors of an extraordinary generation of Americans, who made the cause of liberty, equality and fraternity their own. All of us – French, Americans, Europeans – owe them a debt of gratitude as well, even if they never came to these shores.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone at the “Batterie de Merville” and the Aero-Club of France for making this day possible. Together, you are keeping the memory of 1944 in Normandy alive, and the U.S. Embassy is delighted to be by your side.