

Dear American friends,

My schoolmates and I are from Southwestern France. We are 12, 13, or for the oldest ones of us, 14 years old. We have been very lucky: we have never had to experience any war and the hardship any conflict inevitably causes. But despite our young ages, we did want to be among you, dear American friends, on this Memorial Day 2017, to honor remarkable men and women - men and women who, in the 1940s, while they were still so young, made the defense of freedom their absolute priority. We are present today to salute those who, in full consciousness, out of a sense of duty, out of a sense of honor, for your country, but also for ours - France - sacrificed so many precious gifts: their families, their sweet homes, their youth, their freedom from care, their studies, their jobs or even their own lives...

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Summer, 1944. A glimmer of hope is reborn in France ...

On the night of June 5th to June 6th, over 23,000 British and American paratroopers are dropped into Normandy. Even before they touch down on French soil, these angels from the sky are in the grip of hell. Overcoming their fears, once on the ground, this baptism of fire must be faced with steady determination. For six hours, six endless hours, these men must face an enemy hidden behind every hedge, and must do everything possible to facilitate the second phase of Operation Neptune.

Early morning of June 6th, 1944 ... Thousands of landing craft unload tens and tens of thousands of British, French, Canadian and American troops on over 50 miles of French coastline. Ravaged by endless hours of seasickness and fear, these young men are already exhausted when they land... Within twenty-four hours, the souls of about one-third of these heroes will have already flown to the skies... Under lashing fire, stunned by their buddies' yells and howls, only the lucky few reach the shores of Pointe du Hoc, Omaha Beach, Utah Beach, Gold Beach, Juno Beach and Sword Beach. The waves that come to die on Omaha Beach quickly take on a bloody tinge. Bedford, Virginia, is still sleeping when thirty-four of its young men, part of the very first assault wave sadly known as the "suicide wave", discover apocalypse on Omaha Beach. Within only a few minutes, nineteen Bedford Boys are killed on Dog Green. Nineteen American families will not learn about the deaths of their sons until July 16th — five weeks later, by telegram.

But for the survivors, D-Day is only a step in France ... for the Battle of Normandy is only a beginning ... For weeks, these brave combatants suffer, their throats and stomachs tight with terror, repeatedly come within an inch of death, grieve their wounded, their dead and their missing-in-action. But despite their innermost distress, they daily support their buddies and go ahead, without ever giving in.

The Longest Day was seventy-four years ago, but France has not forgotten ... In June, 2014, my older brother had the wonderful opportunity of taking part in the ceremonies of the 70th anniversary of the Normandy Invasion. He lived an unforgettable experience through unique meetings with many of the veterans who were there on pilgrimage. For him this school trip brought about poignant conversations and strong feelings, ranging from infinite respect to compassion and sometimes, even anguish. If he admits that at times he had tears in his eyes, he also says this trip made him fully aware of the sacrifices and dedication of an entire generation for our freedom and happiness.

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But today, dear American friends, we young French people also wish to honor the selflessness of other combatants of Freedom. We wish to honor those who have been left out of the history books,

but who nevertheless, just like the Free French agents, in the shadows, from the early 1940s, supplied, trained and supported the French Resistance and operated for years in obscurity, on our own land. We are referring to the 440 agents of British SOE and the 77 OSS agents who, in the utmost secrecy, operated in France.

A schoolteacher, a tobacco grower, a taxi-driver, a fashion designer, a jockey, a racing driver, a ship owner, a banker, a journalist, a journalist, but also a forger, a safe driller and a circus artist... nothing about these men and women suggest they might one day become members of secret services. But due to their language expertise, their clever ability to live in France without arousing suspicion, their boldness, their self-control and nerves of steel, they are soon spotted by Buckmaster's SOE or Allan Dulles' OSS staff, then recruited for demanding training exercises that will change the course of their lives. Within a few months these almost ordinary citizens turn into remarkable agents who are experts in deceit, espionage, explosives, sabotage, radio communication, or handling of weapons. All of them learn to kill silently with their bare hands. All of them must forget their own families, their own lives, their own identities, to take an alias and make theirs an entirely fake new life history, whose slightest details must be perfectly assimilated to be recited without a hitch in case of capture and interrogation.

Once the training is over comes the announcement of the mission, which will be accomplished by moonlight airdrop, stealth landing, motor boat or other means of infiltration... All the agents know that once behind enemy lines, they will have only a fifty-fifty chance of survival. But equipped with a cyanide pill capsule, all of them accept the risks without faltering - the risk of being discovered, captured, tortured and then undoubtedly killed in the most horrifying way.

The war will reveal these men and women to themselves. Once on enemy territory, the agents are so secretive and stoic they are often impossible to unmask... Stoicism, distrust and silence are the keys to their success and survival.

For many good reasons, a real legend from your own country, dear American friends, deserves to be saluted by our remarks. Her name is Virginia Hall. Virginia is recruited by British Special Operations Executive, soon after its creation by Churchill. In 1941, she is already 35 years old when, on a train from Spain she infiltrates France. She has a wooden leg and even though a radio operator on such a mission has a six-week life expectancy, Virginia operates in France for 180 weeks — that is, 15 months. In July 1942, Virginia is one of those who make possible a major escape from Mauzac prison camp in Southwestern France, about an hour away from our hometown. Eleven SOE agents successfully break out of jail, including George Bégué, the father of one of our friends, who was the first SOE agent parachuted into France in May 1941. Despite being relentlessly searched for by the enemy and despite her handicap, Virginia walks across the Pyrenees and makes it to Spain. Once in Madrid, she continues operating for SOE before returning to London. But Virginia's epic does not confine itself to British SOE. Wiser for this experience behind enemy lines, she is recruited by American OSS in March 1944 and, while knowing she is still being searched for by the enemy, she volunteers to be sent back to occupied France. This time, it is by way of a British PT boat that the Limping Spy infiltrates France, where she stays until the Liberation, before finally going to work for the CIA from 1951 to 1955.

But unlike Virginia Hall, some agents never make it home ... While OSS official figures are difficult to get, we do have accurate figures on SOE losses... Within the framework of their missions in France, 104 SOE agents, including 13 women, are killed. Andrée Borrel is one of them. She is cremated alive, at the age of 24 ...

For many of the agents, having been accustomed to living in a constant state of danger and risk, returning to their conventional lives is far from easy. In the years after the war, many former agents making the adjustment to peacetime succumb to a kind of boredom or anxiety that they cannot shake. Sleep is elusive or fraught with nightmares and flashbacks. ‘Silence is made of unsaid words’, a former agent once confided. Because of the secrecy rules, for years these former agents must keep silent as to their former wartime activities. This omnipresent weight of secrecy — publicly and even with family and close friends — makes it difficult for them to confront and to deal with their psychological issues; the most painful memories very often remain buried in the memories of these men and women of the shadows, and very often the details of their stories die with them.

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Seventy-two years have passed since the end of the war in Europe, but it is still difficult for the intelligence agents, sailors, soldiers and airmen who survived World War Two to come back to the places where they fought or carried out missions without being overwhelmed with emotion.

When the veterans who fought on D-Day and throughout the Battle of Normandy are on the landing beaches, in Norman villages or in the Normandy countryside, they still see their buddies lying there, sleeping forever...

As for the former OSS or SOE agents, their souls remain haunted by the details of their past cover identities and by the faces of the agents or Resistance fighters they operated with and came to consider brothers and sisters.

But on this so beautiful day of May 2017 which allows us — we Young French Ambassadors of Remembrance — to be present among you, let us not cry or grieve for these veterans. Let us recall the precious moments of joy we shared with these patriots whose hearts are so big. Let us remember what they achieved for each of us. Let us also keep in mind the nobility of their fight and the great lesson of life all of us should get out of it... Since I very often wonder ... Would our generation be ready to show so much courage and dedication to a foreign country? Would we be ready to unite ourselves to combine our strengths and determination for a common cause in the service of cherished values?

Dear veterans, we have traveled to your country so that your acts of bravery are not reduced to mere mentions in history books that very often remain on bookshelves. We are here so that your acts of bravery remain in the memories and the hearts of the free people we all are. And, if the war cannot be erased from your memory, we sincerely hope that our gratitude, our tribute and the dedication of young people to passing on History will ease the personal pain which is the fruit of the ordeals you endured.

Let us keep in mind that even today men and women keep on fighting so that peace and freedom will prevail.

Yes, dear American friends, let us keep in mind these heroic men and women from yesterday and today, and together, let us proclaim our relentless desire and boundless joy to keep alive these beautiful bonds of friendship which unite the people of France to the people of America!