

By **Michael Tsai**
Honolulu Advertiser Staff Writer

As part of a testimonial to American soldiers who helped to liberate Europe on D-Day, President Obama yesterday singled out Kane'ohe resident Zane Schlemmer in a speech from the American cemetery at Omaha Beach in Normandy, France.

In commemorating the 65th anniversary of the historic invasion, Obama said the story of D-Day was told by men like Schlemmer, who, he said, "parachuted into a dark marsh, far from his objective and his men. Lost and alone, he still managed to fight his way through the gunfire and help liberate the town in which he landed."

Obama also acknowledged his grandfather, Stanley Dunham, who arrived in France six weeks after D-Day, and his great-uncle, Charles Payne, a member of the first American division to reach and liberate a Nazi concentration camp.

Schlemmer's son, Brett, said he was watching a rebroadcast of Obama's speech on MSNBC yesterday morning when he heard his father's name mentioned.

"I was totally surprised," Brett Schlemmer said from his home in Kaimuki. "We knew he was getting a commendation from (French President Nicolas) Sarkozy, but we never expected this."

On Friday, Schlemmer and 37 other American D-Day veterans received the Legion of Honor — France's highest award — from Sarkozy at a ceremony at the Hotel des Invalides in Paris.

Zane Schlemmer was a 19-year-old sergeant with the 508th Infantry Regiment when he landed in France as part of Operation Overlord, widely considered one of the most decisive battles of World War II. He and five others were assigned to a post three miles south of Sainte-Mere-Eglise.

Schlemmer was wounded by friendly fire less than a month later, during a battle near Le Haye de Puits. He was wounded again by German artillery fire in January 1945 in the retaking of Thier-duMont ridge.

As Schlemmer would later write, "Our 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment had jumped into Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944, with 2,056 troopers. Only 918 returned to our base camp in England on their return July 13, 1944 — the rest being killed, wounded or captured; however, many of the wounded, such as I, did return at later times."

While Schlemmer, now 84, has been honored many times for his service in France, his son said being included in Obama's speech was special.

"I can't imagine how the old man was feeling when it happened," Brett Schlemmer said. "It's really such a solemn ceremony. It must have meant a great deal to him."



Hawai'i resident and D-Day veteran Zane Schlemmer, center, looked on as President Obama shook hands with Canadian D-Day veteran Joseph Don Roach.

REMY DE LA MAUVINIÈRE |
Associated Press



French President Nicolas Sarkozy embraced Isle veteran Zane Schlemmer after awarding him the Legion of Honor.

REMY DE LA MAUVINIÈRE |
Associated Press

Schlemmer said he has joined his father on his numerous return visits to France to meet old acquaintances, visit the spot where he landed, and walk along the street that bears his name: Rue Zane Schlemmer.

Still, Brett Schlemmer said, his father is reluctant to talk in depth about his D-Day experiences.

"He's not comfortable talking about it," Schlemmer said. "It was pretty ugly."

Some of that ugliness may be put to rest tomorrow when Zane Schlemmer takes to the skies to drop 1,500 orchid blossoms he brought from Hawai'i over Sainte-Mere-Eglise, fulfilling a vision expressed by wartime mayor Alexandre Renaud.

In a book about Sainte-Mere-Eglise, Renaud imagined an American C-47 again flying over the town, dropping not soldiers but flowers.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.