

News story: D-Day 75: Légion d'Honneur presented to D-Day veterans on HMS Belfast

Four British Royal Navy veterans were awarded France's highest honour today for their service in helping to liberate France almost 75 years ago.

The French government awarded medals to Denis Haley, Charles Kavanagh, Patrick Reardon and John Nicholls, who all took part in the allied Normandy Landings, as a way of honouring them for risking their lives to secure France's liberation in the Second World War.

Since June 2014, more than six thousand medals have been awarded by the French government.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

Today is a reminder of why this June we must show our special generation, that we will never forget the debt we owe for the peace and freedom we now enjoy. I would like to thank the French Embassy for their efforts in honouring these men for helping to liberate Europe 75 years ago.

HMS Belfast is a perfect setting and I would like to commend IWM for an ambitious programme of events across their UK sites that offers people the chance to experience the extraordinary story of D-Day at their doorstep.

Denis Haley, 92, served as a signalman aboard HMS Southward Ho towing parts of the mulberry harbour from Portsmouth to Arromanches. He said:

A lot of the things that occurred at that time are lost to people's memories now especially the relationship between members of a ship's company – you become more than mates, you share things. It was my whole life for nearly 4 years. It's a very, very, very special day today. I'm absolutely overwhelmed.

Patrick Reardon, 93, volunteered for D-Day aboard HMS Sheffield, landing on Omaha Beach on D-Day.

John Nicholls, 93, served on HMS Argonaut, firing on German gun batteries on Normandy and driving landing craft to deliver supplies from ship to shore.

Charles Kavanagh, 92, helped to land tanks on Sword beach on D-Day and then supplies for the American Army on Omaha beach.

One hundred days to D-Day 75

With one hundred days to go until D-Day 75 commemorations in the UK and France, the event offered the chance for the veterans who took part in the Normandy landings in 1944 to share their stories and experiences.

The medal presentation took place on board the historic landmark HMS Belfast in its Ward Room with the medals presented by French Ambassador Jean-Pierre Jouyet with Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson in attendance.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson toured the vessel alongside the French Ambassador to hear how the Imperial War Museum will retell the magnificent land, air and sea story through its Second World War collection and its three historic sites: HMS Belfast, IWM Duxford and the Churchill War Rooms.