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WWII Frogman gets grand honor during visit to National UDT-SEAL Museum in Fort Pierce | Video

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FORT PIERCE — "Overwhelmed! Speechless!" is how Norval Nelson, 92, described his experience Tuesday morning at the National Navy UDT-SEAL Museum.

"I had goose bumps on top of goose bumps. I never imagined anything like this," he said, after making the trip from his senior citizen home in Chicago.

Nelson was being honored as one the graduates of the Combat Demolition Unit training at the Naval Amphibious Training Station at Fort Pierce during World War II. He arrived under the auspices of Charity Stripe, an Illinois nonprofit group that tries to fulfill final wishes, similar to the Make a Wish Foundation.

Specifically, Charity Stripe's program "Free Throws for Heroes" and the Westminster Christian School basketball team of Elgin, Ill., had a hand in the festivities. They organized a basketball free throw contest to raise money to pay for the trip.

"(The coaches and players) used their basketball skills and talents playing the game they love to then help Mr. Nelson, who has such a deep-rooted love for his country," said Mitch Salzstein, Charity Stripe executive director. "That's what Free Throws For Heroes is all about."

Tuesday, Nelson's wish to see the museum and places where he trained and pay tribute to the deceased members of his Navy team whose names are carved into the national memorial on site came true.

Fort Pierce Mayor Bob Benton gave Nelson the keys to the city; Vero Beach St. Edward's School fifth-grade students sang patriotic songs for him, an honor guard from the Fort Pierce Coast Guard Station saluted him, and the museum's director retired Navy Capt. Michael Howard warmly welcomed him.

It was nothing like the tough reception he received when he first arrived in Fort Pierce in 1943 for amphibious training, Nelson said.

"It was rough training, the intent was to separate the men from the boys," he recalled. "We lived in six-man tents. Run. Run everywhere. Heat. Sand flies."

Unlike other training programs, Nelson said the Naval Combat Demolition Unit course used live ammunition and explosives. The stress was high and one-third of the starting class failed to complete the course.

But he graduated as a Combat Swimmer in October 1943 on Hutchinson Island and assigned to a Naval Combat Demolition Unit. Later in the war, the units were renamed to Underwater Demolition Teams and their members would be known as frogmen.

He was sent to England, where he would take part in the D-Day invasion as part of a 192-man unit "Force O."

His uniform consisted of cut-off dungarees, swimming flippers, a face mask and a helmet when he was let off a small boat off the coast of Normandy. The team's mission was to cut six 50-yard-wide lanes from a mile offshore through the maze of German underwater defenses and beach obstacles at Omaha Beach to allow the Army to come ashore.

In the first attack, 95 of the 192 men were killed and most of the explosives were lost in the water. The men did not stop, according to the Distinguished Unit Citation they received after the invasion, and continued to scrounge explosives and destroy obstacles, even as the Navy and Air Force began the bombardment.

"The Army came ashore with each man carrying a weapon, food, water and other supplies," said Nelson. "We had nothing. I think they must have assumed we would not survive."

Nelson was wounded on the leg the first day, but kept working. He was wounded on each of the next four days while he operated out of a shell hole. His last wound was to the neck.

"They gave me morphine and I thought I was OK. I got up, walked out of the tent and collapsed," he said. "The next thing I know, I wake up in a hospital in England."

The whole experience gave him a different view of life.

"We didn't want medals, just to live," he said. By the end of the war, his unit received seven Navy Crosses, 12 Silver Stars, two Marine Corps Medals and 95 Purple Hearts.

Nelson had married in 1939 before he joined the Navy, and he returned home to his wife, Lorraine, and a life as a carpenter.

Lorraine, to whom he was married 68 years, died two years ago. Now he and his caretaker friend, Michael Natale, 82, a veteran of the Merchant Marine in World War II,

live in a senior citizen home and make up care packages for troops overseas.

Nelson and Natale will stay in Fort Pierce for the rest of the week, Nelson said.



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