



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

George M. Borrello

Seneca Nation Member Ralph E. Bowen Inducted Into NYS Senate Veterans' Hall of Fame for Heroic WWII Service

GEORGE M. BORRELLO October 2, 2020

| ISSUE: [NYS SENATE VETERANS' HALL OF FAME](#), [SENECA NATION OF INDIANS](#), [WORLD WAR II](#)



SENECA NATION of INDIANS – Jimersontown resident and Seneca Nation member Ralph Elliot Bowen, a sergeant in the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II, was inducted into the New York State Senate's Veterans' Hall of Fame by Senator George M. Borrello Friday during a ceremony at the Seneca-Allegany Event Center on the Seneca Nation's Allegany Territory.

Mr. Bowen, who turned 98 on August 8, is the last surviving World War II veteran from the Seneca Nation's Allegany Territory. Mr. Bowen's family and friends attended the ceremony Friday as did dignitaries including Seneca Nation President Rickey L. Armstrong, Sr.

Mr. Bowen fought in the European Campaign as an aerial gunner aboard a B-24 Liberator heavy bomber, serving from 1941 through 1945 to liberate France and Europe from Nazi occupation. He was a member of the 15th Air Force's 450th Bombardment Group, 723rd Bombardment Squadron. The unit flew missions over France, Austria, Germany, the Balkans and Greece.

"I am honored to be able to recognize Ralph Bowen for his service during World War II," Senator Borrello said. "He enlisted in the U.S. Army within weeks of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. When he walked into that U.S. Army recruiting office in Buffalo, he didn't know what dangers he'd face or if he would ever return home. All he knew was that America needed his help and he was willing to risk his life for the sake of liberty and freedom."

Trained as an aerial gunner, Mr. Bowen manned a .50-caliber machine gun on the side of his B-24 Liberator heavy bomber, fending off attacking German fighter planes. He protected his plane and his fellow airmen so they could complete their mission. The crew was tasked with bombing factories, refineries, oil fields and other high-value targets to break the Nazi's will to fight.

President Armstrong said Mr. Bowen's entire life has been one of service to his community whether as a five-term member of the Seneca Nation Tribal Council, a Seneca Nation Marshal, as a judge on the Nation's Peacemakers Court and Surrogate Court or pastor of Red House Baptist Church.

“As the Seneca Nation president and a fellow armed-forces veteran and Seneca, I am honored to recognize the service and accomplishments of Ralph Bowen,” President Armstrong said.

Congressman Tom Reed said Mr. Bowen’s service and sacrifice should always be remembered.

“Ralph’s service to our nation during a time of great need is something that should be revered and remembered,” said Rep. Tom Reed. “We cannot forget the risks he took and the selfless dedication he showed in service to our country. Today, we stand together to recognize and honor his incredible sacrifice to defend America’s freedoms and keep us safe.”

New York State Assemblyman Joe Giglio lauded Mr. Bowen’s contributions to the nation and the community.

“Ralph Bowen is a real example of a life well-lived,” Assemblyman Giglio said. “His service from a young age when he enlisted after the bombing of Pearl Harbor through today, when he is still doing wonderful things for his community, has made our small part of the world a much better place to live. It is an honor to be present for this ceremony celebrating a veteran, father, and community leader who has committed himself to a full lifetime of service.”

Steve McCord, Director of Cattaraugus County Veterans’ Services, said Mr. Bowen is a perfect example of the generation that saved the world from oppression and tyranny during World War II.

“Mr. Bowen is a shining example of the greatest generation and the epitome of a combat vet,” he said. “When he speaks of his time at war, which isn’t often, he never speaks of the horrors he endured but rather speaks of the friendships and comradery that he developed with those he served with. This is a great honor and Ralph is much deserving.”

As a young airman, Mr. Bowen began his overseas tour in Tunisia, North Africa. While flying combat missions in support of the invasion of Normandy and Operation Dragoon, the invasion of southern France, he would achieve the rank of sergeant. Approximately six months after Germany's unconditional surrender, Mr. Bowen returned to the United States in November 1945. He was discharged at Fort Dix, N.J., concluding a tour of three years and 11 months.

During his service, he earned aerial gunner wings, the Distinguished Unit Citation, Good Conduct Medal, European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with four campaign or service stars, the World War II Victory Medal, and the M-1 Rifle Marksman Badge.

Following his military service, Mr. Bowen returned to Western New York, and the Seneca Nation. He worked as a union laborer and ironworker.

In July 2019, he was presented with France's highest award, the French Legion of Honor, for his role in liberating France from Nazi occupation. Mr. Bowen is the first Seneca and only the second Native American to receive the appointment of Knight in the Order of the Legion of Honor.

"Ralph Bowen and his fellow airmen combated the forces of tyranny that threatened the liberty of people in this country and across the globe," Senator Borrello said. "They took to the air despite the constant threat of enemy fighter planes, being shot down by anti-aircraft guns, challenging weather conditions and vast geographic distances. Acting for the benefit of others in the face of such great danger is the definition of bravery. When he returned home to the Seneca Nation and Western New York, he continued his service to his community. I can't think of anyone more deserving of being inducted into the Veterans' Hall of Fame."

A member of the Snipe Clan, Mr. Bowen was raised in the Coldspring community, Allegany Seneca Territory. He is the father of Jacqueline, Rebecca and Dennis Bowen.

“We need to remember that freedom is never free. Preserving it takes courageous people like Ralph Bowen who are willing to risk their own lives for this nation and the ideals of liberty and opportunity on which it was founded,” Senator Borrello said. “Mr. Bowen’s life has been one of service, beginning with the combat missions he flew during World War II and continuing with his decades of dedication to the Seneca Nation. Recognizing his bravery and valor in the ‘Veterans Hall of Fame’ will ensure his achievements and example endure to inspire others.”

The New York State Senate Veterans’ Hall of Fame was created in 2005 to honor those veterans who have distinguished themselves in their military service and continue to devote themselves to serving their neighbors, communities and country – all qualities that define Mr. Bowen.

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