

World War II veteran to receive French Legion of Honour

[ABC North Coast](#) Samantha Turnbull

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[Photo: World War II veteran Rob Jenkins is to receive a French Legion of Honour. \(ABC North Coast: Samantha Turnbull\)](#)

World War II radio operator Robert Jenkins will receive a French Legion of Honour for his service in the Royal Australian Air Force.

The order is France's highest decoration usually reserved for the country's own citizens, but foreigners who have served the French may also receive the honour.

Mr Jenkins, now 92 and living at Clothiers Creek in northern New South Wales, joined the RAAF in 1943 at the age of 19.

"I joined the Army because I was 18 and I had to, but I got sick of it, so I joined the Air Force," Mr Jenkins said.

"I was drafted as a wireless air gunner and that meant days and days of morse code, which got a bit boring, but it was alright."

That training led to Mr Jenkins travelling to England via the US.

He was stationed at Waddington, Lincolnshire and served in a seven-man crew as a radio operator.

"I did have one very important function," he said.

"When they were going to bomb somewhere, the mosquitoes went in first and measured the temperature, and strength, and direction of the wind.

"The bomb aimers needed that information, so the mosquitoes relayed that information back to England, where somebody worked out what the bomb aimers had to put on their instruments.

"Then, five minutes before the bombing, they sent that to me and I had to give that information to the bomb aimer so he could set his bomb.

"That was my main function — to get the information to the bomb aimer so he could do his bombing accurately.

"The bomb aimer didn't have much to do — he had his five minutes of glory over the target, and I had my five minutes of glory just before the target. The navigator worked flat out all the time and the gunner didn't have anything to do unless a fighter came along."

Attacked mid-air

Mr Jenkins flew out on 26 'sorties' and almost did not make it back from his 12th.



[Photo: The honour is usually reserved for French citizens but is occasionally awarded to those who have worked with the country. \(Wikicommons\)](#)

"We went to Pollitz (Germany), which was five hours from base, and on that trip we were jumped by two fighters," he said.

"They did a lot of damage to the plane, set the engine on fire. Our rear gunner shot one of the fighters down and we're pretty sure we damaged the other plane.

"All the hydraulics on the plane were out, the bomb doors flew open and stayed open. The pilot tried to put the fire out but he couldn't.

"He told us to get ready to bail out of the plane, but then he put the plane into a dive and it put the fire out."

The pilot then flew back to England where he successfully landed with no brakes.

"It all happened in a couple of minutes, it was very hectic," Mr Jenkins said.

"The plane was being thrown around everywhere and the gunners were giving directions to the pilot.

"I just sat there with my parachute on. "We were young and stupid."

Taking Hitler's seat

When peace was declared, Mr Jenkins was sent to Berlin where he experienced what he described as the highlight of his service.

"We were bringing home prisoners of war and when we landed in Berlin we spent most of the day wandering around the city and seeing all the damage," he said.

"We went to Hitler's chancellery and saw what it was like. It was marvellous marble and timber work, and we actually sat at Hitler's desk in the chancellery.

"It was in the Russian zone and the Russians didn't stop us, so we did it," Mr Jenkins said.

"It was really something to sit where the man had been."

Honour from France

After he returned to Australia as a 21-year-old Mr Jenkins became an accountant and met his wife of 64 years, Pat.

He said he did not give much thought to the war and had not kept in touch with his fellow squadron members. "We scattered," he said.

"The squadron was constantly changing because crews were coming and going all the time, so it wasn't like an Army unit or anything like that."

So, Mr Jenkins was surprised when he received a letter to say he had been chosen as a recipient of the French Legion of Honour.

"They've waited 70 years to do it, so the number of people who are going to get one now is very diminished," he said.

"I didn't think I'd done enough to qualify. I only did 26 trips and was shot up a few times, but it was nothing."

Mr Jenkins is waiting to hear the details of a ceremony to be held in Sydney, where he will officially receive the honour.