

Jean-Pierre Lavielle
109 Hickory Hill
Wilton

TESTIMONY

in support of

HB 5638: An Act Naming Route 106 in Wilton after Charles M. Baffo

Representative Guerrero, Senator Boucher, Representative O'Dea, and distinguished members of the Transportation Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of HB 5638: An Act Naming Route 106 in Wilton after Charles M. Baffo.

As you may know, 2014 marked the 70th anniversary of the invasion of Normandy, which led to the liberation of occupied Europe, particularly of France, which had been occupied by Hitler's Germany for nearly five years. To commemorate that anniversary, the French government decided to bestow the Croix de la Légion d'Honneur, the highest French military distinction, upon surviving American veterans who had played a significant role in the liberation of France. I volunteered to help identify veterans in this group living in Connecticut and to help them apply for the decoration.

One afternoon in June of last year, after a story on the application process had appeared in the Wilton Bulletin, I received a call from Mr. Charles Baffo of Wilton, a former First Lieutenant of the Army Air Force. He told me that he would like to apply – not for himself, but for his family. During several meetings at his home, Chuck told me his story.

Lt. Baffo was born in New York in 1922. He enlisted in the military when he was 19 years old. In 1944, he was assigned to the 490th Bombardment Group, and with the 8th Air Force flew both the B-24 Liberator and the B-17 Flying Fortress. As a bomber pilot, he participated in the invasion of Normandy and flew 35 missions over Germany, earning the Air Medal and the Distinguished Flying Cross with four oaks. Born in New York, he earned his BA and Masters' degrees in architecture at Yale through the GI bill after the war, and then moved with his wife Joanne to Wilton, where they raised their four daughters and lived for more than 40 years.

Lt. Baffo's squadron was the first to raid the coast of Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944. They attacked the German positions at Omaha Beach twice, allowing the infantry, which was pinned down on the beach suffering staggering losses, to move inland.

Later that summer, on his way to Central Germany for a bombing mission with his squadron, Lt. Baffo's B-17 was hit by German flak. His plane, Lizzy Belle, lost one engine, and shrapnel pierced her fuel tanks. Unable to continue his mission with just three engines, he turned back intending to return to his base in England. But he realized he didn't have enough fuel to make it. The only option he had was to attempt a crash landing. While flying over Northern France near the Belgian border, he saw a field near

Brussels where he thought he could land. All bomber pilots who had to crash land their aircraft were instructed to drop their bombs first. Looking down, Lt. Baffo realized that he was flying over a very densely populated area and that by dropping his bombs he would kill tens or hundreds of innocent people. So he decided to crash land Lizzy Belle with her ordnance on board – 12 bombs weighing 500 pounds each. A very skilled pilot, Lt. Baffo landed Lizzy Belle smoothly, and the entire crew left Lizzy Belle unscathed.

The French government was very impressed by Mr. Baffo's application. But in October 2014, just before a decision on honoring him with the decoration was to be made, he passed away. Although only living applicants were being considered for the Légion d'Honneur under this program, the unusual decision was made to decorate Lt. Baffo posthumously for his extraordinary wartime service.

Had he been able to attend, a representative of the French government would have presented the Croix de Chevalier dans l'Ordre de la Légion d'Honneur to Mr. Baffo during a formal ceremony at West Point. Unfortunately, that was not possible, but his family has received the decoration: the medal, the document, and the rosette, which is worn in the lapel on formal occasions.

Mr. Baffo exemplified the virtues of the Greatest Generation, who gave so much of themselves to this country and to the world. In the decades after the war, I can tell you that in France they were remembered with the greatest respect and affection. That Lt. Baffo's service during World War II has been recognized not only here but also in France attests to its exceptional character. His story and legacy deserve to be honored and remembered well into the future.

While no thanks will ever be enough, this bill proposes a small but important gesture that will help preserve, in the town he loved, the memory of his name and his extraordinary actions. And by the same token, it will provide a constant reminder of the service to this country and to the world, of all of Wilton's World War II veterans -- who, like Lt. Baffo, were members of the Greatest Generation, whose legacy paved the way for our own generation, and many more to come.

Thank you.