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Congress honors art experts who rescued works stolen by Nazis

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WASHINGTON—Stationed in Germany after World War II, James Reeds was the chief clerk for a little office with a big mission: rescuing art that the Nazis had looted.

On Wednesday, the 85-year-old Kansas City man squinted into the bright television lights on Capitol Hill, clutching an American flag with both hands. His hair and beard were white. He walked with a cane and spoke slowly.

"I think we did a good thing in that war," Reeds said. "We conquered the Nazis and their friends, and we did very good things to protect people from the sins of the Nazis. ... I'm glad to be an American."

On the 63rd anniversary of D-Day, Congress paused to honor Reeds and three other members of the so-called "Monuments Men." They were a small band of art experts that tracked down tens of thousands of pieces of stolen art and cultural artifacts by masters such as Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Picasso and da Vinci.

"This is long overdue," said Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, a Texas Republican who presented flags to the four men: Reeds, Horace Apgar of Oklahoma City, Harry Ettlinger of Rockaway, N.J., and Bernard Taper of Berkeley, Calif.

Rep. Kay Granger, another Texas Republican, called it "a remarkable story of heroism and also true love." She said she wanted to recognize the Monuments Men because so few Americans knew of their work.

"That's why they call it the greatest generation," Granger said. "Because they did heroic things like that and they didn't talk about it a lot."

Dallas author Robert Edsel, who has written a book on the Monuments Men, organized the congressional salute, saying it was an attempt "to celebrate and honor an overlooked group of heroes."

He said the Monuments Men, who received their nickname from American GIs during the war, collected art that had been stored in salt mines, caves and castles. Much of the confiscated artwork was for Adolf Hitler, who wanted to build a personal museum near his birthplace. Edsel called it a "premeditated theft of unparalleled proportion" and said he'll create a foundation to make sure the Monuments Men's work is remembered.

"It was the greatest treasure hunt in history," he said.

After listening to the speeches, Reeds said it was an emotional day.

"I'm impressed," he said. "I don't want to say it's not well-directed, but what should I say? It's bewildering."

Reeds, who began his career at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 1969, worked in the War Department's Monuments, Fine Arts & Archives section. One of the group's original members, he was stationed in Wiesbaden and in Frankfurt and responded to incoming messages regarding artworks and monuments that soldiers had discovered.

"The telephone would be ringing from way off in the American occupation zone, about something that someone had found and they didn't know for sure what it was, but it was a big picture and it looked like a good picture," Reeds said. "We're talking about riflemen who had never had that experience."

What exactly did he do?

"I sat at the telephone or the typewriter, whatever chief clerks are supposed to do, I don't know," Reeds said. "I just got shoved into the job. My previous military experience was as a laboratory assistant in the medical department. When I was armed, it would have been a syringe. That's as high as I got as far as weapons are concerned."

Edsel's book, "Rescuing Da Vinci: Hitler and the Nazis Stole Europe's Great Art, America and her Allies Recovered It," identifies 12 living members of the 350-member team that was charged with saving art during the war. President Franklin D. Roosevelt established a commission that led to the creation of the special unit in 1943.

Reeds said he always knew he was doing important work.

"I knew that people outside this dinky little office we had would be talking about it," he said.

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