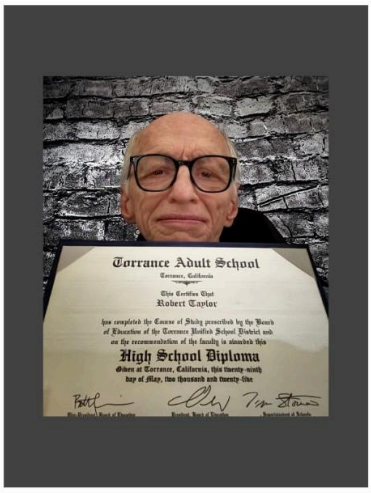
TORRANCE
UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

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PRESS RELEASE

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How One Marine Corps Veteran Finally Earned His Diploma After Nearly Sixty Years



Robert Taylor

Torrance, CA – As we near graduation season, many students will receive the coveted diplomas they've worked tremendously hard for over the past four years. But what if life threw them a curveball, and they had to fast-track their teenage lives into adulthood? That was the case for West High School student Robert Taylor, a 74-year-old veteran who left West High in 1968 to join the United States Marine Corps (USMC) just as he was transitioning into his senior year of high school.

"It was very sudden," said Taylor regarding his decision to enlist in the Marine Corps after a family tragedy.

Through a growing veteran-focused program called "Operation Recognition," Torrance Adult School (TAS) will proudly graduate Taylor after nearly 60 years when their graduating class crosses the stage on May 29 at the Torrance Cultural Arts Center. After specially receiving his diploma in the mail while traveling abroad this month, Taylor is pleased to join the ceremony virtually from Ireland.

Operation Recognition–established in 1999 by Director of State Veterans Memorial Cemeteries, Rober McKean (Massachusetts)–recognizes and honors eligible veterans of WWII, the Korean Conflict, the Vietnam War, and those held in internment camps by awarding them their high school diplomas if they were deployed before graduating. While the program is active in several states throughout the country, only five other school districts in California currently offer it.

The discussion around Taylor began when Operation Recognition volunteer veteran advocate, Charm McElree, reached out to TAS Director, Dr. Stephanie Lewis, about Taylor's opportunity.

"It started with Charm…she called me every day until I got this passed," said Dr. Lewis. "It's really nice that we can do it, but it's really nice that we have this person who understands and recognizes how important it is for veterans to have their high school diploma, and really pushes to make sure that it happens."

Taylor recalled his tough experiences being 17 years old– a rookie member of the USMC boot camp. "Training was pretty severe...every moment of your existence is pretty controlled," said Taylor, a former West High football athlete. "I thought I had it made when I finished boot camp."

After establishing himself in the military, even connecting with a few classmates from West High School who also joined the Marine Corps, Taylor became a member of the 3rd Recon Battalion.

"There are no words for what I walked into," Taylor recalled when sharing his experiences as a member of his battalion. "The mental and emotional stress…nobody can prepare you for."

Charm McElree shared her experience previously working at an adult school in Victorville, California, and witnessing a 91-year-old veteran receive his high school diploma through Operation Recognition. She recalls the unforgettable excitement of the veteran, but ultimately, the impact his “skipping across the stage” made on her commitment to the program.

“He threw his hat up in the air, and I was in...I was in for the rest of my life.”

After living through history – the effects of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the impact of drugs on the United States, the 9/11 attacks, and several intense, conflict-ridden times– Taylor shared powerful words for students graduating from high school or considering the military..., “to not accept those standards, to not accept that divisiveness...to understand how to critically-think your way through decisions. The youth really have to pick up that standard.”

Fast forward to 2025, and Robert Taylor, a skilled artist, photographer, and father, is pursuing school at the New York Institute of Photography, which requires a high school diploma for admission. Thankfully, veteran volunteer advocates like Charm McElree and, now, Torrance Adult School have the opportunity to personally acknowledge Taylor for his service and award him the coveted piece of paper that holds so much history and meaning for more people than we know.

“Primarily...It’s how people can be better positioned for opportunity,” Taylor shared about the program’s importance. “You’re dealing with different generations...not having that diploma might prevent that [opportunity], when in fact the opportunity to receive the diploma is available to them.”

If you know a veteran who might benefit from this program, please invite them to learn more by visiting https://www.tusd.org/tas/programs/high-school-diploma-equivalency/operation-recognition.

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