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For some cadets at West Point, Jewish life is shelter in a storm

By Peter Ephross, JTA

There's a joke at the U.S. Military Academy that 50 percent of the first graduating class was Jewish — and that it's been downhill for Jews ever since.

The joke is true, at least on the face of it: Simon Magruder Levy was indeed half of West Point's two-person graduating class in 1802, and Jews have made up a much smaller proportion of graduating classes since. But Jewish life appears to be alive and well among the 80 or so Jewish cadets currently enrolled at the hilly campus beside the Hudson River.

"It's a really close-knit group. They're my closest friends," Megan Williams, West Point's Hillel student representative, says of the other Jewish cadets. That friendship can be crucial for cadets at West Point, where the roughly 4,000 students who make it through four grueling years receive a free education in exchange for at least five years of post-graduate service in the army.

Some of the Jewish cadets come from military families. Some are descendants of Holocaust survivors who want to give something back to the country that provided a safe haven for their grandparents. A few admitted they had to overcome parental resistance to enroll. After all, while becoming a U.S. military officer is no shame, it's not the career most Jewish parents envision for their children.

Jacob Bergman found that out when he informed his Israeli parents of his plans to attend the military academy. "When I said I was going to West Point, they were like, 'What?!'" Bergman recalls. But Bergman — recruited as a track athlete and attracted to West Point by the promise of something beyond a normal college experience — persevered.

Now, four years later, Bergman, who was born in Israel but grew up in White Plains, N.Y., is a senior at West Point. He has earned the prestigious appointment of honor captain, the student who sits with the academy's superintendent and decides what punishment should be meted out to cadets who have violated regulations. His parents have since come around, he says, and his father now is proud to visit him at the academy. His father "lives vicariously through me," Bergman says.



Bergman's years at West Point haven't just educated him and taught him leadership and military skills — ranging from fieldwork in weapons training and hand-to-hand combat, to classes in military strategy and ethics — they've also made him feel more Jewish.

It started the summer before his first, or plebe, year. Known as Beast, cadet basic training is “five weeks of all the things you've seen in movies: sudden-death haircuts, buckle-shining, wall-jumping, scrambling cadets looking perplexed,” writes David Lipsky, author of “Absolutely American,” a recent book on West Point. One of Bergman's older friends told him to ask for permission to participate in prayer services on Friday nights during Beast. “No matter how scared you are during basic training, tell them you want to go to services on Friday nights,” Bergman remembers his friend saying. Bergman did and his commanders complied, allowing him and the other Jewish cadets to attend services at the school's Jewish chapel.

The multimillion-dollar edifice at the top of the campus “was a sanctuary during basic training,” Bergman says. Dedicated in 1984, the chapel recently hosted the third “Jewish Warrior Weekend” when some 40 students from civilian universities, as well as some from the other service academies, visited West Point to get a taste of cadet life.

The tall white building features a sanctuary that seats several hundred people. The services draw cadets, faculty members and local Jews, including members of the Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America. The building also has a library, small exhibits and a hallway plaque with the name of every known Jewish cadet graduate, from Levy through Lt. David Bernstein, a 2001 West Point graduate who was killed this fall in Iraq.

The most famous of the Jewish graduates, David “Mickey” Marcus, is known for parachuting into Normandy on D-Day and then helping convert the Haganah into a regular army during Israel's 1948 War of Independence. He was killed in the 1948 war by friendly fire.

Like Jewish students at other colleges, West Point cadets celebrate the Jewish holidays on campus, and they mark Holocaust Remembrance Day. Living a completely observant Jewish life at West Point is difficult, cadets admit: There aren't enough observant students to merit making kosher food available, and the demands of studies and military training make Sabbath observance nearly impossible.

Some Jewish students, like Matt Moosey, say they refrain from eating pork and shellfish. “People do their best here,” said Moosey, a Sephardi Jew from a military family in Fort Collins, Colo. The military does its part for soldiers in the field, providing kosher MREs — meals ready to eat — for those who want them. There's also a Jewish choir at the academy that is about two-thirds Jewish and performs songs such as “Ani Ma'amin” and “Jerusalem of Gold” alongside old military standards at synagogues and college campuses. “I've been as active in Jewish life here as I was at home,” says Ben Diamond, a plebe who was a member of the Conservative movement's United Synagogue Youth in his hometown of Houston. The choir also is a way to introduce soldiers — particularly non-Jewish cadets from small towns with few or no Jews — to Jewish culture.

One Jewish student quoted in Lipsky's book said other cadets tried to convert him. “Basically, lot of 'em say Jesus is really the best way to go,” George Rash is quoted as saying. Changing such sentiment is a matter of education, says Maj. Elizabeth Robbins, who has served as the cadets' Jewish lay leader while West Point's Jewish chaplain, Rabbi Carlos Huerta, is deployed in Iraq. “Almost all of the issues of religious intolerance are based on ignorance, not malice,” Robbins says.

Maj. Huerta, described by students as a dynamo, is credited with galvanizing the West Point Jewish community since he arrived in 2000. The Jewish cadets are well aware that they, like Huerta, could face dangerous duty in Iraq once they graduate. While many Jewish college students elsewhere are at the forefront of student antiwar movements, Jewish students here appear universally supportive of the war on terrorism. That the United States is allied with Israel makes

the war personal, Jewish cadets say. But they're clear about one thing: The United States comes first. "We might be very proud of Israel, but our first and foremost duty is to the United States of America," Moosey says. And they're as connected to God as to country.

When Bergman goes out in the field, for example, he makes sure he has his essentials, like his weapon and water. But he also carries a Bible and a camouflage yarmulke. "You believe in religion in a foxhole," he says.

Female Rabbis in the Military

By Chaplain (LTC) Bonnie Koppell

The United States military chaplaincy traces its origins to the Revolutionary War. In a letter dated September, 1756, Col. George Washington noted that, "The want of a chaplain does, I humbly conceive, reflect dishonor upon the regiment." Rabbis began to serve in uniform during the Civil War, and the National Jewish Welfare Board was formed three days after the US declared war on Germany in 1917. This organization was charged with recruiting and training rabbis for military service, as well as providing support materials to these newly commissioned chaplains. The JWB also maintained oversight of Jewish chapel facilities at military installations.



Growing up in Brooklyn, New York, near the site of the US Army Chaplain Center and School, which was then located at Ft. Hamilton, I first contemplated a career as a rabbi in the late 1960's. The Vietnam War was in full force, and I developed a curiosity about what went on behind those walls, adorned with a cross as well as the symbol of the Jewish Chaplains Corps, a Magen David affixed to the tablets of the 10 commandments.

In 1976, having graduated from Brandeis University, I entered rabbinical school at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia. In order to serve as a military chaplain in any branch of the service, "ecclesiastical endorsement" is required. Each religious denomination establishes an endorsing agency which is charged with interviewing, endorsing, and overseeing military chaplains.

In 1977 I applied for "ecclesiastical endorsement" from the JWB, and on January 1, 1978, received a copy of the letter sent on my behalf to the Office of the Chief of Chaplains indicating that the JWB had granted, "our ecclesiastical approval for the purpose of entering the chaplain trainee program in the Staff Specialist Branch (Divinity Students) of the Department of the Army."

In the summer of 1979, I headed to the U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School at Ft. Wadsworth/Ft. Hamilton to complete the six week Chaplain Officer Basic Course. I was one of 4 Jews in a class of 108, and one of 3 women. Women had only recently been admitted to the Chaplain's Corps, and I was the first Jewish woman to enter the school. Upon graduating from rabbinical school in 1981, I applied for a "branch transfer" from "chaplain candidate" to "chaplain." This should have been a pro-forma shuffling of paperwork, but it became an issue as the JWB expressed reluctance to endorse a female Rabbi. A five-year struggle for the cause of female Rabbis in the military ensued. Due to an Army regulation limiting the number of years one can participate in the Chaplain Candidate program, I wrote to Rabbi Aaron Landes of the JWB in September, 1985, requesting that he expedite my application, which had, by then, languished for four years. This was followed in February, 1986, by a letter from CH (LTC) James Bruns, Chaplain Candidate Program Manager, to the JWB. He wrote, "The issue of denominational endorsement for Bonnie Koppell has reached a critical

point for this office. Bonnie Koppell entered the Chaplain Candidate Program 22 May 1978 with denominational approval granted by the JWB. The regulations limit participation in the candidate program to a maximum of 6 years. Due to the uncertainty of whether or not JWB would endorse a female Rabbi we have allowed Captain Koppell to continue in the program pending a decision by your endorsing board. Please provide me with a target date for a firm decision and a request to continue Captain Koppell until that date.”

Finally, in a letter dated December 9, 1987, the JWB wrote to the Office of the Chief of Chaplains granting my ecclesiastical endorsement. Ironically, the letter stated that, the JWB “granted him ecclesiastical endorsement.” By this time, Rabbi Julie Schwartz had stepped forward to apply for active duty as a Navy Chaplain, where she served as a chaplain for three years at Oakland Navy Hospital.

Although I continued to serve in the Army Reserve, it was not until Operation Desert Storm in 1991 that I was called to active duty. In mid- February I was notified that I was to report to Ft. Sam Houston, in San Antonio, Texas. The Army anticipated casualties being medically evacuated to the Brooke Army Medical center, and wanted to ensure that there would be a Rabbi on staff to care for their needs. After being relieved of active duty, I was assigned to the 164th Corps Support Group in Mesa, AZ, where I served as the Assistant Group Chaplain and then as the Group Chaplain for the next ten years.

The military requires ongoing education for promotion to the next rank. Some of these courses are in residence, others are by correspondence. In 1991 I completed the final of four phases of the Chaplain Officer Advanced Course. Camping out for four days at Ft. Dix, the only female with 100 male chaplains, was one of the highlights of this experience. In 1993 my unit spent three weeks participating in Team Spirit at Camp Humphries, South Korea. This is a joint military exercise conducted by the Republic of Korea and the United States Army. The Purim Ball at the Seoul Hilton was unforgettable. In 1995, I completed the United States Army Command and General Staff College.

“Sharing of faith and perspective among chaplains” is an extraordinary aspect of her work as a Navy chaplain, reports Rabbi Karen Soria, who served in the Navy from 1992 until 2003. In her position as a Staff Chaplain, she had responsibility not only for the Jewish service members, but also for the crisis counseling which is an essential element of this work. She notes that the Marines really love their chaplains, and that they appreciated her willingness to be with them at the difficult times, sharing MRE’s and shelter halves. She described her relationship with them as “very precious,” noting that “by walking the ground that they do” a dialogue is opened up where their deepest issues can be explored with trust and confidence.

Chaplain (CPT) Chana Timoner was less enthusiastic about her experiences on active duty in the Army. On December 29, 1992, the NY Times reported that Rabbi Timoner was about to make history as “the first Jewish woman to hold a long term assignment as a chaplain in the Army.” At that time, Chaplain Timoner looked forward to her assignment to Ft. Bragg, NC. With age, she said, comes tolerance and maturity. Sleeping in a barracks and eating Army food were undaunting.

In the same article, Chaplain Timoner also mentioned the interfaith aspect of her work as one of the highlights. “It’s really beautiful,” she said, “because in the military you are looked at as a chaplain, not as a Jew, a Christian or a Muslim. They don’t care what religion you are. They need someone who is sensitive and caring and knows the system.”

Following her assignment to Ft. Bragg, Chaplain Timoner was sent to a post near the DMZ in Korea. She enjoyed conducting services out of the back of her jeep as well as playing piano and organ for the evangelical Christian services. Her obscure location however, hindered her ability to do the job, and physical illness forced her to return to the States. She passed away in 1998.

I was called to active duty once more, following the tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, in support of Operation Noble Eagle. For one year I had the privilege of serving as the Brigade Chaplain for the 112th Military Intelligence Brigade at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. In addition to the usual counseling, which is a critical part of every military chaplain's work, I taught classes in stress management and suicide prevention to students in the Chaplain Officer Basic and Captain's Career Courses, as well as providing training to other chaplains on various aspects of Jewish observance. I initiated a program of study for Jewish soldiers and civilians which included Torah study, Pirke Avot and Beginning Hebrew. Our small Jewish congregation celebrated Shabbat and holidays together. The Department of Defense mandates that each military installation commemorate the Holocaust during the Days of Remembrance, and I created a unique service for this occasion. In addition, I served as the keynote speaker for Fort Huachuca's Women's History Month luncheon. Being away from my congregation and my family for a year was challenging, to say the least, but the work was very meaningful and much appreciated.

My present assignment is to 37th Transportation Command in Kaiserslautern, Germany. During the summer of 2003 I had the great joy of working with CH (COL) Kenneth Leinwand, the Command Chaplain for USAREUR. Chaplain Leinwand is an outstanding Rabbi and an outstanding soldier and it was a wonderful opportunity for me to work with and learn from him.

Chaplains are non-combatants- we do not carry weapons, we are not trained to fight. We are there to minister to the religious needs of the troops, and, as such, we are an essential part of the military force. No one likes war, no one wants war. No one prays for peace with more fervor than the soldier who stands ready to lay down his or her life for our country. Yet I am not a pacifist. I believe that there are times when war is justified. War is always a horrible tragedy, but it is not necessarily immoral...I am proud to consider among my many identities as wife, as mother, as rabbi, as teacher, as friend, yet another- as an American soldier. God forbid the need should arise, our Jewish soldiers deserve to have rabbis who are trained and ready to deploy alongside them, to be there to offer all the support they will need. I am proud to be among those who stand ready to go with them.

Chanukah in the Sandbox

By Mikhail Ekshtut

It would seem like a coincidence that I again find myself in the Arab Middle East at Chanukah time. But as a Jew, I know that there are no coincidences.

The last time I was here was during the Persian Gulf War. I was in the Marines then. We were on board a Navy ship, waiting for the ground war to start. I was not observant then, but still a proud Jew, and I knew it was Chanukah time. I made a crude menorah out of aluminum foil and lit Chanukah candles in the middle of the Persian Gulf.

I am no longer in the Marines. I am now an Air Force Reserve Chaplain Assistant. My job now is to provide religious and spiritual support to the members of the Air Force and to our entire Armed Forces. I was recently called up to active duty to support Operation Iraqi Freedom. So now I am back in the "Sandbox," again at Chanukah time. Now, as a Chaplain's Assistant, and an observant Jew, it is my job to seek out the fellow Jews and to provide them with an opportunity for religious observance. I found a total of five other Jews on our base.



Chanukah had also arrived. Thanks to donations from friends back home, I amassed an ample supply of prayer books, menorahs, candles, dreidels, kosher cookies, candy, chocolate coins and other goodies to hand out.

The dreidels were most popular with the non-Jews. Everybody wanted one. While passing them out, I had the opportunity to teach them, and subsequently the whole base, about Chanukah and the meanings behind it...and how to gamble with a dreidel, of course.

In the course of my networking, and procurement of kosher wine for Shabbat (the local Arab customs officers had confiscated my supply upon arrival, because alcohol is contraband in Muslim countries), I also found out that a nearby Army camp had more Jewish soldiers there, and they were throwing a Shabbat/Chanukah party on Friday the 26th, the last night of the festival. It was no simple matter to arrange the logistics and transportation for this trip, but I have found that when you try to do God's will, He matches your effort. We arrived shortly before sunset, just in time to light the menorah and the Shabbat candles. I could now take off my pistol and welcome the "Shabbos Queen."

Other Jewish soldiers also started trickling in; most were coming from other camps as well. Eventually, we were even able to make a minyan. We started the service by kindling the lights. It was quite a sight to see. The Shabbat candles and a dozen fully lit menorahs all standing on one table and burning bright...in the middle of the Arab Middle East no less!

The Jews that had gathered together that night were a mixed bunch, Army and Air Force, Officers and Enlisted, young and old, and everybody with a different background. Most of our "congregation" had Reform or Conservative upbringings. One kid however, was the son of an Orthodox congregational Rabbi.

The Chanukah party was a blast! We had lots of kosher snacks, sodas and Kedem grape juice. The Colonel made potato latkes for us, and I cut up and passed around a kosher salami that was sent to me.

More presents were handed out and then we started the Vegas style dreidel gambling for Chanukah gelt. The big winner, Mordechai, an Army Specialist, and former paratrooper, was taking his earnings, a shopping bag full of the chocolate coins, back to his unit to share with his buddies.

Before I left Seattle, I was talking about this war with one of my rabbis. He said to me that this is a war against evil and the forces of Darkness. The way to combat the forces of Darkness is by bringing light into the world. "How do you bring light into the world in the middle of a war zone?" I asked. "By continuing to study Torah and doing as best you can," he answered, "even in a war zone. That is how you bring light into the world."

The theme of Chanukah is all about bringing light into the world, and about a miraculous military victory, generated by the efforts of a small band of devout Jews. So surely, by keeping the Shabbat and observing the mitzvah of lighting the Chanukah candles, we the small band of American Jewish soldiers, are not only doing our part militarily, but also spiritually, in this war against the forces of evil and Darkness. Technical Sergeant Mikhail Ekshtut is currently deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, until March 2004, to an undisclosed location in the Middle East.

Jewish war vets honor their dead, the past

By Bob Batz Jr. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, reprinted with permission of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

“Today let us pause to remember and pay tribute to the sacrifices of the Americans who gave their all for the preservation of freedom around the world.”

The passage was part of a Veterans Day memorial service at the New Light Congregation in Squirrel Hill Friday night. The speaker was Code Gomberg, Allegheny County commander of the Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America. He read the list of local members who have died since last Nov. 11 — 34 names — and asked people not to forget them.



But many people don't know much about Jewish veterans in the first place. A few years ago during the group's convention in Washington, D.C., a military officer asked the cap-wearing Gomberg and his buddy, Leroy Bloom, what group they were with. When they told him, he said he didn't think there were any Jewish combat veterans. Gomberg wanted to cold-cock him. “I said, ‘Major, you better go back and learn some American military history.’ “

Uninformed and sometimes anti-Semitic slights have dogged Jewish veterans, and were one reason a group of them formed the organization — in 1896 — making it the nation's oldest active veterans organization. Like the much bigger and more high-profile American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Jewish War Veterans group is fast losing its biggest active constituency — World War II veterans such as Gomberg and Bloom. Nationally, membership is about 100,000.

In Allegheny County, there are only about 625 members — down from a late 1960s peak of about 2,000 — and very few are active. Only three of five posts meet regularly, says Gomberg, 81, who is commander of the oldest, Pittsburgh Post 49, which was started by World War I and Spanish-American War veterans in 1925. Vets of Vietnam and later conflicts haven't replaced those who served in WWII and Korea.

At last Thursday's monthly meeting of Bellefield Post 299 at New Light Congregation, only Bloom and five other members showed up — one short of a quorum. They held a brief meeting anyway, starting with the Pledge of Allegiance to a small flag set in a plastic stand marked with the JWV's Star of David logo. Bloom read the prayer “that our two-fold heritage of Americanism and Judaism may be alive and meaningful within us.” Bloom, who lives in Oakland and who recently turned 85, says it's frustrating that Jewish vets' contributions have been overlooked.

At the Stanton Heights home he shares with his wife, Jerry, Gomberg keeps a thick scrapbook, “My WWII Memories,” filled with photographs he took while serving as a maintenance man on a hospital train in Europe. The Hill District native was drafted at age 19 in February 1943, and his unit entered France six days after D-Day. They crisscrossed Europe, transporting Allied wounded from the battlefields to safety. Once, while running empty, the train derailed on a bombed-out section of track and Gomberg was thrown and injured. But he was able to snap a shot of the tilted train car.

He also photographed the liberation of Paris and, later, the “wounded” who turned out to be German officers that his train secretly transported to the signing of the surrender in Reims, France. At the time, Gomberg didn't know much about the atrocities the Nazis were committing against Jews. He even visited the Buchenwald concentration camp, but it had been liberated and only later did he realize what had happened there.

Bloom, too, says he was mostly unaware of the Nazi atrocities toward Jews until after the war. He flew 30 missions over enemy territory as a radio operator in a B-24 bomber. Many planes never made it back to their English bases, and Bloom's Liberator flew through fire and flak. One time, when the bombs didn't release, Bloom had to remove his two

parachutes to squeeze back through the racks and kick them loose. When the plane made a sudden evasive maneuver, Bloom was thrown off balance and barely caught himself from falling through the open bomb bay.

Though he had the option, he did not wear altered dog tags to mask his religion. The military offered the disguise — C for Catholic, P for Protestant, rather than H for Hebrew — to Jewish soldiers, thinking they'd be better treated if the Nazis captured them. "I just wanted to wear them," Bloom said of the "H" tags. "In retrospect, I was a little dumb in that." These days he likes to wear his Distinguished Flying Cross medal, which he's pinned to a ball cap printed with an image of a B-24.

Gomberg always wore his "H" tags, too. He agrees with Bloom that, save for a few incidents, they and other Jews weren't treated any differently than anyone else in the military. As Bloom put it: "It didn't mean anything on the plane."

While Jewish veterans think of themselves as American veterans first, they're proud of their own contributions, which they continue to make, whether by volunteering at Veterans Affairs medical centers — including Christmas duty — or placing thousands of flags on veterans' graves in 36 local Jewish cemeteries.

In June, the grand opening finally was celebrated for Veterans Place of Washington Boulevard in East Liberty. These once-condemned rowhouses have been renovated into transitional housing for homeless veterans who have been treated at the Domiciliary at the VA Medical Center on Highland Drive. The first residents began moving in last month, and the sixth one moved in this past weekend. The complex has room for 48, of all faiths.

The \$2.5 million complex, paid for by city, county and federal agencies and local foundations, was spearheaded by Jewish War Veterans East Boros Post 718, particularly by its indefatigable commander, Sidney Singer. In the 1970s, he and others in his post led another nonprofit project to build the East Boros Apartments, a 101-unit senior high-rise in Monroeville. Now, at age 79, he's still working to raise about a half million dollars to construct a community center at Veterans Place. Last week, he was on site helping to build a shed.

"My feeling right now is, Veterans Place is going to be of tremendous need when these fellas start coming back from Iraq," said Singer. The North Side native, who served as a States-side air corps trainer during WWII, said he volunteered in 1942 mostly because of what the Nazis were doing to Jews. He's set up the apartment complex so that, after it's paid for, all profits will go to the JWV's National Museum of American Jewish Military History in Washington.

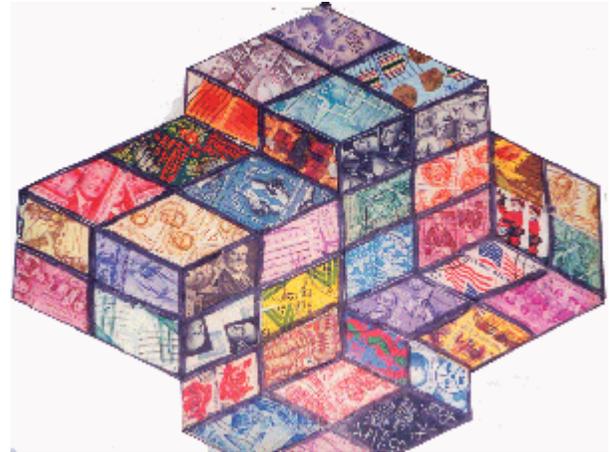
Singer will be driving a van with Gomberg, Bloom and a few others who can't march as a small band of Jewish War Veterans join this morning's Veterans Day parade. But he says the brotherhood of veterans is bigger than religion. "It's the pride that you served your country."

Jewish War Veterans Seeking Used Stamps for Projects

By Stephanie Slater, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Jewish War Veterans west of Boca Raton are trying to stamp out pain and depression. For 10 years, the Snyder-Tokson Post 459 in Century Village has been collecting stamps and distributing them to hospitalized veterans across the country. "It helps in the healing process," said Bill Ruchman, project chairman.

Now the veterans are asking the public to join their cause. Canceled stamps, both foreign and domestic, are needed for the project, initiated by the JWV of the United States. Some veterans use the stamps to make collages or decorate plastic bottles; others collect them.



It's a pastime that allows veterans to exercise their motor skills and imagination, said Marty Kaufman, founder and former chairman of the national stamp program. "One of the worst things a person has in the hospital is boredom," Kaufman said. "With stamps, they are physically working with their hands and minds... creating a brotherhood. If a person is shy and has no interests, this can create an interest."

Since 1991, JWV has collected nearly 10 million stamps from corporations, private collectors and individuals. Kaufman, of Hollywood, said the stamps are also distributed to handicapped people, shut-ins and youths. Students use them in history and geography lessons. The stamps should be cut off envelopes, but do not have to be removed from the paper, said Eugene Moore, a Boynton Beach resident and vice chairman of the national program. Soaking stamps off paper and sorting them into categories is part of the therapy.

"They'll make a collage of all love stamps or all car stamps," said Moore, who once received a box of stamps from San Quentin State Prison. "It takes a vet's mind off his problems." And it reminds them that they haven't been forgotten, said Fred Leitner, chairman of Post 459. He's received letters of thanks from veterans nationwide, including New York and California. Leitner, an Army publicity officer from 1942 to 1945, is bringing a shoebox full of stamps to the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Riviera Beach. "I figure I'll save the postage," he said. "It cheers them up to see a friendly face once in a while. It gives them someone to talk to — and sometimes complain to."

Canceled stamps can be mailed to Bill Ruchman, JWV of the United States, Snyder-Tokson Post 459, 1021 Yarmouth B, Boca Raton, FL 33434.

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