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On this Memorial Day, let us also remember our Jewish veterans

By Seymour "Sy" Brody

On May 31, 2004, our country will memorialize our deceased veterans. This day of remembrance will be observed throughout the nation with ceremonies, religious services, visiting cemeteries and personal thoughts of loved ones that have departed. On this solemn day, let us not forget our deceased Jewish men and women, who gallantly served and defended our country.

Today, Jewish men and women in the United States military armed forces are involved in Iraq, Afghanistan and Haiti. A number of them have been killed or wounded. They are continuing the historic tradition of Jews serving and fighting for our country.

From colonial times to the present, Jews have been in every major skirmish, battle, war and expedition in defense of our country. Their bravery and sacrifices in battle are second to none. American Jews have always had a higher percentage in the military of their percentage population in America

Jews in America started their fight for the right to serve in the military when Jacob Barsimson, Asher Levy, Abraham de Lucena, Jacob Cohen Henricques and other New Amsterdam Jews struggled with Governor Peter Stuyvesant for equal citizenship.

They were finally granted the same rights as other citizens to be a part of the military. This was the beginning of American Jews serving in the military of our country.

Jews were very active in the American Revolutionary War, and they served with honor and distinction in battle and in civilian life. Francis Salvador was known as the "Paul Revere" of the South. He was the first Jew to be killed in battle on August 1, 1776.

Mordecai Sheftall acquired the reputation of the "great rebel" in fighting the British in the South. Lieutenant Colonel Solomon Bush was the highest ranking Jewish officer in the Continental Army and was decorated for bravery in battle.

Haym Salomon was a civilian hero and a fervent patriot whose love for liberty and business acumen made him a vital force in obtaining the financing for the success of the Revolutionary War.



Commodore Uriah P. Levy served as a naval captain in the War of 1812. He ended the practice of flogging sailors for punishment, and he wrote many technical books on the training of naval officers which are still used today.

The Civil War divided the nation and the Jewish population, which was about 150,000. There were about 8,500 Jews fighting for the North and the South. They were commended for their bravery and intrepidity in battle by their superior officers.

It was in 1862 that Jewish rabbis were permitted to serve as military chaplains. Up to then, the law stated that only ministers of "Christian denomination" could be military chaplains. This was changed when they deleted the word "Christian," and ordained rabbis were now eligible. This was the beginning of a notable history of the Jewish Chaplaincy service in the military, including today's conflicts in Iraq and other areas of the world.

In the 1890s, Mark Twain and other famous writers asserted that Jews did not fight in the Civil War. On March 15, 1896, seventy-eight Jewish Civil War veterans met in New York City to refute these lies and slanders and organized the Hebrew Union Veterans, which was the precursor group to the Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A. (JWV).

Today, the JWV is the oldest veterans organization in the country. It is the only active Jewish organization with a Congressional Charter. The JWV is a sponsor of the National Museum of American Jewish Military History, the only accredited veterans museum in the country. They are both located at 1811 R St. NW, Washington, DC.

In World War I, there were more than 250,000 Jews who answered America's call to action: over 3,500 were killed; over 12,000 were wounded, and they received over 1,100 decorations for bravery. The Jewish Welfare Board was organized in 1917 to meet the needs of the Jews in the military.

In World War II, 550,000 Jewish men and women served in the armed forces of our country. About 11,000 were killed, over 40,000 were wounded, and they received over 52,000 medals for bravery. They were part of the military forces that opened the gates of the concentration camps in Europe to free the remaining survivors.

Jews gallantly fought in the Korean War. They had many heroes like Major Melvin Garten, Major Murray Gurfein and Marine Corps Corporal Abraham Geller, the son of a rabbi. The United States had over 135,000 casualties, and Jews were a part of these statistics.

The Vietnam War in the 60s and 70s was a long protracted combat. The heroism and casualties of the Jewish combatants reflected their participation in this war.

Jews have been in many other combats: the Mexican War, Haitian Campaign in 1915, the Persian Gulf War, Somalia, Bosnia and other expeditions where our country's military forces were involved. Jews have always been an important segment of these American military missions.

There have been seventeen Jewish recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest award for bravery that a member of the military can receive: There were six in the Civil War, two were Indian fighters, one in the Haitian Campaign in 1915, three in World War I, three in World War II and two in the Vietnam War. Col. Jack Jacobs, (Ret.) of the Vietnam War, is the only living Jewish recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Jews have never shirked their responsibility in fighting and defending our country. They have given the best years of their lives to insure and preserve our American freedom and democracy. In their youth, Jews in the military always gave their "today" so that our children and grandchildren would have their "tomorrow."

On this Memorial Day, let us also remember our deceased Jewish men and women, who valiantly served our nation.

This column was written by Seymour "Sy" Brody, Editor of "The Jewish Veteran," JWV's official publication, and author of "Jewish Heroes and Heroines of America."

Greetings from Rabbi Mitchell Ackerson

By Rabbi Mitchell Ackerson

Since I've been stuck in Qatar for the last few days in transit to Afghanistan for Purim, I've had some time to think about my recent travels to see soldiers and meetings with Iraqis I have had in various ministries. During many of those visits I feel like the old EF Hutton commercial. Not that everyone wants to hear what I have to say, but when my military cover (hat) comes off, and the kippa becomes visible, you can often hear a pin drop. Everyone stops, turns to look, and then moves on usually. Often I get pulled over by some senior military officer who always recommends that I not wear my kippa, and I always remind him that not only is it legal, but that if we are trying to establish a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society here in Iraq, folks like me belong too, and they have to get used to it. Unfortunately Jews need not apply to come back. But I also get older Iraqis who tell me of the good days when Jews and Chaldeans were plentiful and the economy good.



I raise the issue because symbolism, and the kippa I wear is powerful symbolism, is so important, and when you stick out you have certain obligations. When others walk around no one knows if they are Jewish, Christian, or Moslem. When I walk around everyone knows and often comments. Often the comments are positive and sometimes not, but I must always be mindful that people are looking and judging "the Jews" by what I do, rightly or wrongly. It is an obligation not taken lightly. It is also an issue that transcends the local Iraqis and Kuwaitis, or even the Qataris. Soldiers of all faiths and especially Jews make particular note of the kippa. To take off my hat is an invitation to ask questions of the Rabbi, from Kabbalah and Madonna, to what does the Bible really say, to do Jews really not believe in Jesus?

The other week while tracking down some young Jewish soldier in the middle of nowhere, I walked into the company tent and was greeted by a CPT who said, "Rabbi, what brings you out here?" I told him that I was visiting one of my flock and mentioned the name, and he answered, "Really I didn't know he was one of us." He probably saw the look on my face and turned to me and said, you probably don't have me on your list, but I saw the yarmulke so I figured it was OK to tell you and then proceeded to "rat out" a few other closet Jews. Each one said the same thing. We keep under the radar, but, when we see a yarmulke, we figure it's OK, we have some "protection." Everyday I get officers and senior noncommissioned officers with 20-30 years of service who ask me what that is (my Jewish Chaplain insignia), but, when they see the kippa, the eyes show they have figured it out.

Of course, there are exceptions. Last night in the mess hall a Master Sergeant told me to take off my kippa because no one wears a head covering in his mess hall. I really wanted to put him in his place, but with everyone looking on and needing to act appropriately I instead gave him a well reasoned lecture on Federal Law and military regulations. I don't think he bought it, and I spoke to his commander today who was anything but happy about it and apologized. Imagine if it was a young enlisted soldier who met that Master Sergeant, and got thrown out of the mess hall without getting anything to eat. Too many Jewish soldiers have spent their careers never seeing a Rabbi, never knowing that the Jewish community is there for them, never having some protexia, or someone to learn from.

It amazes me that today there are more Moslem chaplains on active duty than Rabbis though there are certainly more Jews. Moslem soldiers speak up while Jewish ones usually say I'm not observant or practicing, giving credence to the

notion prevalent in both Jewish and non-Jewish circles that, if you are not Orthodox, you aren't Jewish. Hence they don't need Rabbis around because there are so few Orthodox Jews in the military, and the others aren't practicing so they don't need you. Perhaps the reason that they are not practicing is because we are not there. We all know the thought that a lie told often enough makes people think it is true.

We need to provide more protection for Jews in the military. We have to show the flag and be visible and living and breathing reminders that Jews serve and serve well in our Armed Forces. It will take courage to initiate new methods of bringing Rabbis into service, new leadership in the organizations that are responsible for Jewish military personnel, new ways of doing business which haven't changed in 20 or more years. Strength is in numbers and in being visible. I would love to see the day when a Jewish Chaplain no longer draws stares either with local Arabs or military personnel of the United States.

Rabbi Ackerson is the senior Jewish chaplain for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Fort Gordon Communications Center Named for Lt. Col. Reuben Abramowitz

Fort Gordon, Georgia, dedicated its new communications center on Jan. 23, 2004, to the memory of Lt. Col. Reuben Abramowitz, the first director of the European Theater Signal School at Ansbach, Germany.

Lt. Col. Abramowitz, who joined the New York National Guard as a private in May 1916, served during WWI with the 37th Anti-Aircraft Battalion in France and then with 1st Field Signal Battalion during the occupation of Germany. During a later assignment in Hawaii, his commanding officer took a special interest in him, encouraged him to make the Army a career, and told him he would be promoted to corporal when he received his third-class communicator's license. By the time he was promoted to master sergeant in 1940, Abramowitz had perfected the instruction techniques required to expand Signal Corps training for radio operators needed in preparing for World War II.



In 1942, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant but quickly attained the rank of major by May 1943. During this time, he served as the officer-in-charge of radio code and traffic training at Fort Monmouth. From December 1944 to June 1945 he served as the officer in charge of the European Signal Center. In July 1945, Abramowitz established a European Theater Signal School at Ansbach, Germany. His son, Ben Abramowitz, now a retired Colonel himself, was the first U.S. military dependent to become a Bar Mitzvah in Germany after World War II. In 1999, Ben's grandson also became a Bar Mitzvah at the same synagogue.

Reuben Abramowitz's grandson, Dave, currently commands the 17th Aviation Brigade in Korea. His two other grandsons, Sid and Alan, have also served as commissioned officers in the Army.

Bookreview: No Greater Glory: The Four Chaplains and the Sinking of the Dorchester in World War II

By Dan Kurzman

No Greater Glory: The Four Immortal Chaplains and the Sinking of the Dorchester in World War II is the true, largely untold story of one of America's worst sea disasters. Central to this dramatic, spellbinding account is the role of four men—chaplains of different faiths—who performed an act of heroism, faith and brotherhood, unsurpassed in the nation's history.



It was near midnight on February 3, 1943, the troop carrier USAT Dorchester was pushing through the freezing sea off the coast of Greenland when a German submarine's torpedo shattered her starboard side. More than two-thirds of the nine hundred men aboard perished in the icy water, in part because of a catastrophic command decision to delay their rescue. Even more would have died if not for four men—a priest, a rabbi and two Protestant ministers of different denominations—who distributed life jackets, including their own, to those without them. Then linking arms and praying together, they went down with the ship in an act of supreme altruism that has immortalized them.

Rev. George L. Fox (Methodist) was a decorated hero of World War I and believed he understood and could ease a soldier's suffering; Rev. Clark V. Poling (Dutch Reformed) realized in law school that his true calling was not law but God; Father John P. Washington (Catholic) dedicated himself to the Catholic Church after a near death as a child; Rabbi Alexander Goode (Jewish) volunteered to be a chaplain after Pearl Harbor, joining a long family rabbinical history.

Dan Kurzman interviewed many survivors and the families of the deceased. Kurtzman details the lives and families of the four chaplains. He gives us another dimension to their lives.

One of the survivors was Ben Epstein, of Delray Beach, FL, and a member of JWV. He was in a life boat and saw the Dorchester sink as the four chaplains were together on the deck, their hands entwined and each saying their prayers.

Kurzman has a listing of the names of all the people who were on the Dorchester when it sank: He has listed those who survived and died and their branch of service.

The Chapel of the Four Chaplains, in Valley Forge Pennsylvania, is dedicated to the four chaplains who sacrificed their lives so that others might live.

Dan Kurzman's book, No Greater Glory, is truly a testimonial for these four chaplains. This book is a "must" for any library about World War II and what heroism is all about.

Reviewed by Seymour "Sy" Brody