

Articles from
The Jewish
Veteran

The Official Publication of the Jewish War Veterans of the USA

Volume: 58, Year: 2005 • Number: 4, Season: Fall

Fifty-Six Years Late and Just on Time: Tibor Rubin Receives the Medal of Honor

By by Michelle Spivak Melinger

People around him began to lose heart. Too much time had gone by. The key witnesses were dead. The documentation was challenged. Anti-Semitism, some said, persists in the Armed Forces. The litany of reasons why it would never happen was convincing. But the little Jew who survived two wars and imprisonment in both a Nazi concentration camp and a Chinese prisoner of war camp did not lose heart. He is made of faith and love, hope and courage. He simply does not know how to give up.



God blessed him with these gifts while fating him to be born in the midst of a perfect storm of hatred, torture and murder. The storm named Hitler. God blessed him with these gifts and he used them to protect others, those of us less gifted - those of us more vulnerable to the winds of change that toss our lives around.

Tibor, “Ted” as his friends know him, was right. On September 23, 2005, he stood beside the Commander-in-Chief of the most powerful military in the world. He received a gracious salute and words of praise and then he stuck out his neck so that the President could decorate it with the country’s highest honor - the Congressional Medal of Honor.

What brought these two divergent men together? What accounts for the retired butcher from Garden Grove, California sharing the stage with President George W. Bush? The path to this honored place has to do with Ted’s gifts; the love he has for all people, his courage and faith, and a lot of sticking his neck out.

Tibor Rubin was born 75 years ago in Paszto, a tiny Hungarian shtetl with just 120 Jewish families. His father eked out a living as a shoemaker, supporting his family including “Tibi” (his childhood name) and his five siblings. By age 13, there was no escaping his destiny. He was a Jew in the maelstrom of the most virulent storm of hatred to beset the Jewish community of Europe in over 400 years, the Holocaust. Rubin and his family were torn from their little village.

Rubin was sent to Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. For two years he resided in that hell hole, learning the ways of survival. When he was freed by American soldiers, he promised himself that he would become a “GI Joe” and save the world from those who steal the lives of innocent children just because of their country, their color, or their faith.

First he traveled Europe on a quest to find his family. He learned that both of his parents and two of his sisters had perished. Once he found the remainder of his family and determined that they were safe, Rubin was on his way to the United States to start his life anew and to fulfill his promise to be a “GI Joe”.

Beirut 1983: An Indelible Memory

By Donald H. Harrison

Reprinted with permission from the San Diego Jewish Times

Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff’s view of the American military’s attitudes toward religious pluralism was seared into his consciousness on Sunday morning, Oct. 23, 1983, after truck bombers murdered 241 U.S. Marines who were sleeping in the next barracks building in Beirut.

The rabbi, who is a former Navy chaplain, recalled the attack of more than two decades ago during his Aug. 17 speech to the Jewish War Veterans’ national convention at the Mission Valley Hilton. His dramatic recollection was a prelude to explaining why he is optimistic, as the recently appointed special assistant for values and ethics to the Secretary of the Air Force, about the military’s ability to counteract any discrimination that may exist in that branch of the service.

Resnicoff told of running from his living quarters to the rubble of the nearby Marine barracks, where he and others tried to help the wounded as best as they could. He told of tearing off parts of his uniform to make ersatz bandages, and even pulling the kippah from his head to wipe the blood from a wounded Marine’s face.

Working nearby, a Roman Catholic chaplain, Father George Pucciarelli, ripped a circular piece of cloth from his own camouflage uniform and insisted that Rabbi Resnicoff use it to replace the kippah. Pucciarelli explained that it would be good for the Lebanese people to see that American clergymen of different faiths don’t hate each other, but instead are comrades and colleagues in the service of God.

Resnicoff suggested that one problem in the Middle East is that people of different religions always seem to fight against each other, instead of with each other. “If there were more inter-religious foxholes in the world, maybe we wouldn’t need so many foxholes,” he declared, winning applause from the Jewish War Veterans.

He said that prior to the Beirut bombing, most U.S. military service chiefs had opposed permitting uniformed service people to wear articles of religious clothing like a kippah, out of fear that it would detract from the Armed Forces’ sense of common purpose. However, he said, as knowledge of Father Pucciarelli’s gesture became widespread, the sentiment that America is a place that values religious differences caught on. Soon thereafter, the Congress adopted a law permitting service personnel to wear customary religious articles with their uniforms.

Furthermore, he said, the military now has kosher meal rations for those who request them, and even permits religiously observant Jewish personnel to refrain from shaving during 30-day mourning periods.

It’s the Constitution – Sir*

By Remarks by MeLinda Morton at the 110th JWV Annual Convention

What’s all the fuss about? So, a few zealous Evangelicals are proselytizing at the Air Force Academy. It’s a free country after all. Why shouldn’t they be able to express their beliefs? Maybe a little religion will help the place.

The “fuss” of the past few months is about the Constitution. It is about the ability and willingness of the Academy, the Air Force and National leadership to create and uphold a Constitutionally appropriate military training environment. This is particularly important because the young women and men who attend the United States Air Force Academy will lead others in harm’s way; they will fly and fight at the behest of our nation. They will also fly and fight in locales of increasing religious and cultural complexity. It is also important because bigotry, fostered at the Air Force Academy or in other military training venues becomes bigotry on the battlefield; and nothing damages unit cohesiveness and military morale as much as institutionally sponsored bigotry.

Specific Religious Climate and Culture Issues at USAFA

So let’s talk a little bit about what has been going on at the Air Force Academy:

First of all let me clarify that the United States Air Force Academy is a federally financed military training institution. It is a Direct Reporting Unit (DRU) of the United States Air Force. Every young woman and man attending the Academy receives either a Congressional or Presidential appointment. The Academy exists to provide a course of study leading to the granting of a Bachelor of Science degree, and the Academy provides the military training necessary and appropriate for graduates to be commissioned as 2nd Lieutenants in the USAF. No cadets pay tuition to attend the Academy; in fact, upon arrival at the Academy, cadets are inducted into the Air Force, take the oath of office, and become paid members of the military. There is no question that the Academy and its staff are government actors.

Secondly, the current issue surrounding religion at the Academy is not about any individual cadet, sharing or discussing issues of faith. No one has ever objected to earnest and consensual discussions of faith in appropriate settings among peers. Therefore claims that so called “secular forces” outside the Academy are trying to prevent cadets from practicing their faith – are beyond ridicule.

The current religious issue at the Academy is an issue of faculty, staff, and leadership using their position and power to establish and support a particular religious agenda. Officers and leaders at the Academy, who use their governmental power and position to promote Evangelical Christianity, teach cadets to disregard the Constitution. They send the clear message that, within the Air Force, the approved resource for spirituality is Conservative Christian Evangelical ideology. Additionally, these officers and leaders corrode Cadet training by creating an environment in which any spiritual difference is seen as antithetical to unit cohesion.

The Air Force Academy is intentionally regimented. Cadet life is lived within a strict hierarchical structure and every aspect of Cadet experience is meticulously constructed to create officers. Within such a regimented environment, repetitive Constitutional violations indicate that the problem is systemic and pervasive. Leaders, not cadets, are responsible.

Therefore my primary concern with the religious climate and culture at the Academy focuses upon the systemic and pervasive leadership practices which associate official governmental power and position with particular articulations of religious ideology. I refer to:

- Oral presentations and written guidance issued by the Commandant of Cadets (Brigadier General Weida), voicing overtly Evangelical Christian ideology.
- Brigadier General Weida’s promotion of local Conservative Christian Evangelical worship services and religio-theatrical productions. (Services and religio-theatrical productions at the Conservative Christian Evangelical Mega-Church, New Life – where Brigadier General Weida regularly attends.)
- Faculty introductory presentations in class that announce the Conservative Christian Evangelical orientation of faculty members and the desire to promote Conservative Christian value systems. (“Hello, I am Captain Smith and I am a born-again Christian – my faith is very important to me. If you would be interested in learning more

about Christian life, I am happy to talk with you after class.”) - Air Officers Commanding (AOCs) counseling cadets concerning the “will of God.” Especially concerning are AOC’s who counsel women cadets to abandon the pursuit of Air Force pilot positions because, for women, such activity conflicts with “God’s plan.” This reflects a Conservative Christian value and political position – not the policy of the USAF.

- A lack of clearly articulated policy from the Superintendent. The USAFA Chaplain Service requested for 15 months a Superintendent’s policy letter.
- Chaplain activities and events, which focus exclusively on Conservative Christian Evangelical ideology and use local and national Evangelical presenters and resources. (In my three years at the Academy, every Protestant Christian speaker was from a Conservative Christian organization or spoke from a Conservative Christian perspective.)
- Worship times and events, which are concretized in training schedules, establishing a Conservative Christian Evangelical paradigm for worship and expressions of faithfulness. Conservative Christian Evangelical models of worship attendance and emotive spiritual expression define “Faithfulness”. Other traditional and non-traditional worship forms and faith practices are discounted, marginalized or completely ignored.
- Official USAFA Character Development training, highlighting Conservative Christian Evangelical ideology as the only appropriate spiritual resource.
- Special Programs in Religious Education (SPIRE) programs for Protestants, staffed exclusively by local and national Evangelical para-church organizations; the only exceptions are the two Protestant SPIRE programs run by USAFA Protestant chaplains.

These, and other leadership practices at USAFA lead to pervasive and systemic violations of the Constitution and establish an environment derisive of religious difference and damaging to unit cohesion.

Yet with all these examples – and in the wake of national interest, the Academy and Air Force Leadership continue to insist that these are “isolated incidences” of primarily Cadet misconduct – rather than a systemic problem.

In May of 2005 the Air Force dispatched an investigative team led by Lt General Brady to “Review the Religious Culture and Climate” at the Air Force Academy. Lt. General Brady’s “Report of the Headquarters Review Group” detailed example after example of Academy Constitutional violations. Yet, General Brady’s team was unable to connect-the-dots and “discover” the systemic nature of the problem. In the Brady Report, clear Constitutional violations are sympathetically characterized as “well-intentioned,” and open proselytizing by Academy leaders is explained as devotion to religious “duty” or “a lack of awareness.”

General Brady repeatedly praises Academy leadership for “aggressively addressing [the] subject.” Yet, on July 2nd of this summer, after the release of the Brady report and while national attention was focused on religious issues at the Academy, Academy leadership again failed to manage the Cadet schedule to accommodate Jewish and Muslim worship. Within the first two days of Basic Cadet Training this summer, an “Optional Chapel Service” for Jewish and Muslim Cadets conflicted with required preparation for the Basic Cadets’ first inspection. “Chapel Time” on Sunday had no such conflicts. Once again, Academy leadership failed to accommodate non-majoritarian religions in the same way in which they accommodate Christianity. Far worse, Jewish and Muslim Basic Cadets were forced to choose between being good team members and attending worship. This is a simple scheduling issue, and should have been resolved at a very low administrative level – however, because Academy leadership does not set a tone of rigor and intention in regard to these matters – low-level functionaries permit the continuation of wholesale religious discrimination.

The Bigger Picture

The Constitutional issues at stake in this current Academy controversy extend beyond the military environment. These Constitutional issues are vital and instructive to all citizens. The 1st Amendment’s prohibition against associating

governmental power and position with religious ideology engenders the individual liberty in which free expression of religion may flourish. Governmental support and government sponsored promulgation of religious ideology, whether for military character building, economic efficiency or social control is Constitutionally inappropriate.

At the Academy, the troublesome interplay between governmental power and religious creed is painfully apparent. Just as apparent are the personal consequences of such Constitutional impropriety. Air Officers Commanding have told women cadets to forego an Air Force career as a pilot because such duty violates "God's plan." Jewish students must accept Christian paradigms for worship attendance and religious expression or risk being labeled an "unfaithful slacker."

Academy leaders, engaging in hand ringing confessions about the difficulty of culture change, make great theater but fail to address the problem. Superficial training modules in which facilitators are forbidden to use the word "intolerance" and are cautioned against "making policy" are embarrassingly ineffective. It is apparent that the Academy and the Air Force does not know what to do.

Suggestions

Direct and extended Congressional oversight is critical. Congressman Steve Israel of New York, and Congresswoman Capps of California have been particularly helpful in attempting to address this problem. However, they too have met very stiff resistance in the halls of Congress. Congressman Israel is calling for a non-partisan Presidential commission to examine issues of religious climate and culture throughout the military. His proposal is essential to pro-actively addressing this pressing Constitutional issue.

With Congressional help, the Academy must establish an on-going task force of well-credentialed and interested experts to regularly examine Academy practices.

Leadership changes at the Academy are essential. This is clearly a leadership problem. Leadership promulgates the current climate and culture at the Academy. It is unrealistic to believe that leaders committed to using their power and position to promote Conservative Christian Evangelical ideology, will now create a climate rigorously attentive to spiritual pluralism and governmental religious neutrality.

In addition, the Academy should actively partner with knowledgeable civilian academic institutions and model the successes of Constitutionally appropriate military training environments.

Chaplain training should be examined and improved to address issues of religious diversity and pluralism. (There is currently no USAF Chaplain training emphasis on working in a pluralistic environment – Chaplains need to know that the military is NOT a mission field!)

Chaplains must clarify the use of the terms "Evangelism" and "Proselytization." At a Chaplains conference this summer, the Air Force Deputy Chief of Chaplains voiced an Air Force Chaplain policy that Chaplains "may not proselytize" but they may "evangelize the un-churched." Obviously, there are major problems with such a statement – the least of which may be – who gets to decide who is "un-churched?"

Conclusion

The Air Force Academy's Constitutional improprieties reflect a national struggle. The difficulties and failures of Air Force leaders are a window into the dilemmas of our national soul. Yet, the time has come to stand up and face our problems. The dedicated Cadets of the Air Force Academy deserve to learn and train in a Constitutionally appropriate arena. We all share the duty to uphold and defend this essential freedom. After all, "It's the Constitution - Sir."

[*The phrase “It’s the Constitution – Sir” is borrowed from a Jewish cadet. This cadet bravely came forward to report his experience of religious intolerance at the Air Force Academy. In a meeting with USAFA faculty and staff, a JAG officer asked the cadet why he decided to come forward. The cadet paused a moment and then said quietly, “Well, after all, it’s the Constitution, sir.”]

[Editor’s Note: MeLinda Morton, a Lutheran minister, was a chaplain at the Air Force Academy from 2002-2005. While at the Academy, Chaplain Morton has been critical of the Academy for not addressing incidents of religious bias and proselytizing within the Academy and has spoken out publicly about these issues. Chaplain Morton was reassigned from her position as Chaplain Executive Officer at the Academy earlier in 2005 and reassigned to a post in Okinawa. She has subsequently resigned her commission.]

CONVENTION PLUS

By Co-Editor’s Corner Bob Zweiman, PNC

We programmed the convention to explore current topics of concern to the members—[a] veterans’ health benefits—[b] religious discrimination at the US Air Force Academy—[c] the Israeli disengagement from Gaza, --and [d] support for the National Guard and Reservists. All sessions were well attended and very informative, leading to fruitful discussions.

Veterans’ health benefits, including mandatory funding, were discussed with Dr. Jonathan Perlin, Undersecretary for Health at the VA, after the veterans were told that the VA’s operating budget was short by some 1.2 billion dollars and that funds were going to be diverted from other budgetary items to make up the shortfall, and Congress then added 2 billion dollars of funding. JWV is a part of a partnership with nine other VSOs in fighting for mandatory funding.

The topic of religious discrimination at the Air force Academy was exceptionally revealing, with the speaker being Chaplain MeLinda Morton, who had brought forth the original complaint dealing with the spread of evangelical proselytizing and anti-Semitism. After her revelation of the situation at the Academy, the Air Force sought to transfer her out of the Academy, and, after that insult to the truth, she resigned rather than having to accept the abuse of their actions. She discussed in detail what was being done on the ground. To hear the Air Force’s response, we heard from Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff, who is the Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Air Force, specifically designated to investigate and oversee the implementation of a program to respond to religious discrimination and to avail all there of universal acceptance of diversity. His approach to seeking to resolve the problem hopefully will bear fruit—JWV will continue to keep the issue in focus.

Disengagement of Israeli settlers and troops from Gaza was the subject of a seminar consisting of Gen. Ran Goren, the Chairman of the brother VSO in Israel known as TZEvet, General Roger Brautigan, who recently went to Israel as a participant in our most recent Allied Veterans Mission, and Professor Sanford Lakoff, who is an expert on the Middle East. The media had painted the withdrawal as divisive and almost bordering on creating a civil war in Israel. The seminar, followed by questions, was held on the first day of the withdrawal. As we all know, the newspapers on the first and second days of the withdrawal had articles blasted across their front pages. After that they relegated the articles to pages six and further back in the papers. Why? Because Jews acted like Jews. Unlike the Sunnis and Shiites who go about killing each other to gain total acceptance of their way of life, the Jews hugged each other while, at the same time, seeking an understanding of their differences, which were, in their minds, irreconcilable and without resolution other than neither would kill the other for a dream. It turned out to be substantive rather than a media event.

Then we signed a national petition of support for the National Guard and Reserves. JWV by its resolutions and releases and letters to Congress has consistently supported proper funding and training of the National Guard and Reserves. The

truth of that need has been disclosed in Iraq and Afghanistan where the active troops consist of between 45 and 50% of our forces there.

Little did we realize that just a few days after our convention ended, Katrina would rape the Gulf States area of our nation with nature's disaster. Large units of the National Guard and Reservists from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama were in Iraq and Afghanistan, and those who were available to control the disaster were from about 38 other states brought in to create a calm and stable atmosphere in an area ripe with anarchy and theft, looting and a total depreciation of the lives of the citizens.

The real tragedy was the awakening of the American people that Homeland security revealed itself to be a phantom in dealing with nature's wrath and the uncontrolled fear that it augers as to action in the event of a terrorist disaster. Here we saw a sports arena being turned into warehousing for the victims rather than acting as a departure point to deliver them away from danger to a place where they would have adequate food and shelter. Poverty reeked as an almost insolvable deterrent to evacuation of the disinherited. The 9/11 tragedy and Iraq turned out as a full disclosure of the incompetence and a lack of cohesion within an intelligence system with the common sense of a Three Stooges movie. With all of the so-called restructure of our first response abilities and the drills of how to protect our citizens, we were once again faced with incompetence, non-existent first response, and an ego-driven and turf-controlled catatonic jurisdictional dispute among Federal, State, and local officials.

Probably one of the most disturbing aspects of Katrina is the appearance of civil unrest resulting in a breakdown of social order. The presence of rampant poverty in the United States was shown on TV to the distress of American's public. The indecision in response and the imposition of negative procedures has laid bare a real imperative for restructure of the American society. A restructure in recognition that response to nature's disasters or terrorism demands a positive response from our citizens—anything less would result in anarchy or the sterilization of our democratic society.

We can no longer have the luxury of stagnating in the belief that our Superpower status grants us freedom from a social reorganization. After WWII, we led in the restructuring and stabilizing of Europe through the Marshall Plan. What we now need is a Marshall Plan for America, and not merely for New Orleans, since poverty, lack of health care, and economic distress are rampant and must be addressed as a national obligation. This will lead to an internal strengthening of our Nation and its place in the international community.

Our act should have been together—to place blame on each other is frightening to see while we watch our TVs and see not only the suffering but the result of a failure of our government.

Our convention was a plus—our Nation's response to disaster is a minus!!

VA Focusing on Mental Health, Official Says: Quality Care Vowed for New Veterans

By Rick Rogers, Staff Writer

The Veterans Health Administration is making mental health counseling and trauma centers a priority for new veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, a senior Department of Veterans Affairs official told a veterans group yesterday.

Dr. Jonathan Perlin, the undersecretary for health in the Department of Veterans Affairs, serves as the chief executive officer of the nation's largest health care system, one that treats 5.2 million people a year.

He said the VA is spending \$2.2 billion of its roughly \$30 billion 2005 budget on mental health care. It expects to spend \$2.3 billion in 2006. That amount includes funds for combat-induced conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder and for substance abuse.

For severe physical wounds, the VA has designated four regional polytrauma centers -- in Minneapolis, Palo Alto, Tampa, Fla., and Richmond, Va. -- that specialize in physical rehabilitation and traumatic brain injury.

A VA spokesman said seriously injured Marines and sailors based in San Diego would probably be treated in Palo Alto unless they ask to be treated at a VA center closer to where their families are. More than 14,500 troops have been injured in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"We want to reach out to these new veterans," Perlin said in a speech at the 110th annual convention of the Jewish War Veterans of the United States, which is being held in San Diego this week. "We want to make sure that they have the best care."

Recently, national news magazines and independent research organizations have praised the VA for its innovative, quality care, a departure from the criticisms of the past.

"We've come a long way in 10 years. This isn't your father's VA," said Perlin, who served as deputy undersecretary for health from July 2002 to April 2004 and for part of that period doubled as the Veterans Health Administration's acting chief research and development officer.

About 399,000 troops have been discharged since the war on terrorism began three years ago. The VA has seen about 120,000 of those, including 1,000 active-duty troops who are being cared for by the VA.

In late July, the Senate approved an additional \$1.5 billion in emergency funding for the VA after more veterans than expected sought medical services. The measure has been approved by the House.

In June, the VA acknowledged a funding shortfall, after insisting that it had adequate resources for hospitals and clinics.

Besides larger-than-anticipated numbers of injured veterans from the Iraq war, the VA said its resources were strained by aging veterans of World War II and the wars in Vietnam and Korea.