

JEWISH HEROES OF AMERICAN WARS

A History

In 1654, in Colonial times Jews were refused the right to stand guard at the stockade. Instead, they were forced to pay a compensation fee for their lack of service. Asher Levy, one of the original Jewish settlers petitioned the Government, and after two years, he finally won the right for Jews to serve.

Jewish Americans then continued to serve in the United States armed services.

In the French and Indian war, which lasted 7 years, until the mid 1700's, at least one Jewish man rose to the rank of Captain. Records are scarce but certainly others served.

Next we move to the American Revolutionary War. Several Jewish war heroes made a name for themselves but none more famous than Haym Salomon. He was born in Poland in 1740, and with his family fled for his life to the United States. He moved to New York where he became a successful stock broker. Haym Salomon was arrested as a spy by the British army and imprisoned. Because he spoke 10 languages, the British used him as an interpreter. In a twist, Haym Salomon transmitted phony messages which he used to facilitate his own escape.

He was a close friend of George Washington, and began raising money for the American army. He raised enough money for George Washington to lead the Yorktown campaign which was the final and winning battle of the Revolutionary War. According to legend, General Washington came to Salomon on Yom Kippur to appeal for funds. Although Haym Salomon was a devoutly religious Jew, he recognized that love of country was an aspect of his religion. While leading High Holiday services, he turned to the congregation and suspended services to collect money for the army. Only after sufficient funds were pledged, did Haym return to the Yom Kippur High Holiday services.

When the United States won its independence from Britain, one of the first orders of business was to design U.S. currency. In designing the one dollar bill, the Jewish community's contribution to the war effort was recognized.

THE ONE DOLLAR BILL contains the Star of David. Below it is an upside down representation of the MENORAH. Haym Salomon was one of George Washington's advisors. During the cold winter months at Valley Forge, when American soldiers were freezing and running out of food, it was Haym Salomon who organized Jews from America and Europe to send money and aid to the American Troops.

If you look at the Jewish Star, you can see that it is formed of 13 stars. These represent the original 13 colonies. The star is called Salomon's Seal for Haym Salomon. The Menorah and Star were included at the insistence of George Washington who said "We should never forget the Jewish people and what they did in the interest of America."

Moving from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War. We all recognize that Jewish people do not hold the same belief when it comes to politics. When the Civil war, the war between the states started, there were Jews living in the South and in the North. There were Jewish men who believed in slavery and served in the Confederate army of the South. There were Jewish men who opposed slavery and served in the Union Army of the North. The estimate is that in 1861, 150,000 or .5 percent of the U. S. population was Jewish. Nevertheless, 600 Jewish soldiers died in the Civil War. Judah P. Benjamin served as Secretary of War. He publicly advocated a plan where any slave willing to fight for the Confederacy would be emancipated. Abraham Lincoln was president at that time and he appointed the first Jewish chaplain to serve the Jewish soldiers.

World War 1 brought Jewish heroism to the front. In World War 1, Nineteen year old William Shemin, an American Jew, saved wounded comrades in the battlefield and led his unit to safety. In 2011, President Obama signed the National Defense Authorization Act which contains a provision known as the William Shemin Jewish World War 1 Veterans Act. The act directs the Pentagon to review battles involving Jewish soldiers. These soldiers who may have been overlooked for the Medal of Honor simply because of their faith are given the award post-humously.

The next great war was World War 11. In World War 11, a half million 500,000 American Jews served in the various branches of the United States armed services. Nevertheless there is a prevailing sentiment that Jews somehow avoided military service. It was not that Jewish men were not serving, rather they were not identifying themselves as Jewish. There were three ways. Upon enlisting, many of the men checked the box under religion as “no preference.” Some of the service men were simply “unaffiliated Jews.” It should not surprise anyone that During World War 11, in a fight against Nazi Germany, many American enlisted men had a legitimate concern about being identified as a Jew.

In the summer of 1939, Albert Einstein, a Jewish American Scientist, wrote to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He warned him that Nazi Germany was developing an atomic bomb. Julius S. Oppenheimer, a Jewish immigrant from Germany, was appointed the scientific director for the Manhattan Project to develop an atomic weapon. He is referred to as “the father of the atomic bomb.” Germany surrendered before the atomic bomb could be used against it.

Here is a name everyone is familiar with: Henry Kissinger. In 1938, his family fled Nazi Germany and settled in New York. From 1969 to 1977, Kissinger directed U.S. foreign policy. With his assistance, the United States entered into a detante with the Soviet Union, Kissinger orchestrated the opening of relations with the People’s Republic of China, and finally, he negotiated the Paris Peace accord. Henry Kissinger, a German Jewish American, won the Nobel Peace prize.

Jewish officers have risen over the years in Rank. Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, a Jewish Polish immigrant, rose to the rank of Four Star admiral in the U.S. Navy. In 1986, he became the longest serving naval officer in U.S. history with 63 years of active duty. Another Jewish navy man, Admiral Jeremy M. Boorda, was the first enlisted man to rise to the Navy’s highest post of Chief of Naval Operations. He joined the Navy at age 17, dropping out of high school and leaving his Jewish home in Illinois.

The Vietnam War followed as the next significant military war in U.S. history. Here are three Jewish Heroes of the Vietnam war. Roger Briskin of

Ardmore Pennsylvania led his troops into battle at Da Nang Quang Province on March 31, 1967. He died in battle that day attempting to rescue one of his men. Fred Zedeck of Brooklyn New York served as a Captain in the U. S. Air Force and as a Tactical Fighter Wing in Thailand. He became certified as a weapon systems officer on the F-4 Phantom Fighter plane and flew 165 combat missions. He retired as a colonel with 10 Oak Leaf Clusters. Finally, Ira Goldstein of New Jersey enlisted after he graduated from Rutgers University in 1964. Ira responded to his country's call for fighting men and attended officer's training school. He flew 110 combat missions in Vietnam and returned to teach ROTC courses at University of Michigan until 1971.

As of 2011, 44 Jews have died while serving in the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. For 1/3 of them, their Jewish affiliation only became known after their death. Today there are currently 10,000 Jewish men and women in active military duty.

Compiled by Ilissa Zimmerman

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