Jewish World War II Heroes Finally Rest Under the Star of David

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By Dorian de Wind

The Moderate Voice

Dorian De Wind

AUSTIN, Texas — Reminiscing about a 2015 visit to the Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial, in Margraten, I wrote, "Walking among the more than 8,000 white marble crosses and Star of David headstones laid out in long, silent curves across the pristine verdant lawn, we could not be closer to home — the home of the brave."

The photograph that accompanied that writing (above) does indeed show at least two Star of David headstones. Among the 8,000 headstones, there were probably several other Star of David headstones marking the final resting places of American Jewish troops who died on nearby battlefields fighting the Nazis during World War II.

At that time, we did not give the scarcity of Star of David headstones a second thought.

Perhaps we should have, for during World War II, 550,000 Jewish men and women served in all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces and more than 11,000 gave their lives for freedom, including three Jewish American U.S. Army soldiers who were awarded the Medal of Honor, posthumously.

However, others *did* give it some thought.

One of them is Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter — a professor of Jewish history at Yeshiva University, New York — who, during a visit to the Normandy American Cemetery in France just one year earlier, gazing at the more than 9,000 headstones at that cemetery overlooking Omaha Beach, "suspected that there were too few Stars of David among the crosses."

Upon his return home, Schacter discussed the issue with his friend and military historian, Shalom Lamm, and both decided to do something about it.

Their first mission was to investigate the case of Pvt. Benjamin Garadetsky, a soldier who served as a medic during World War II, who was killed in France by the Nazis on August 23, 1944, and who was buried under a cross in the Normandy cemetery. From an "Ashkenazi-Jewish-sounding name," through painstaking research of family and military records to working closely with the American Battle Monuments Commission, Schacter and Lamm concluded that the young soldier resting under a Latin Cross was indeed Jewish.

American Cemetery and Memorial, in Margraten, the Netherlands (Photo by author)

On June 20, 2018, Schacter and Lamm joined Benjamin's family members, friends and others and held a "dignified rededication ceremony" at the Normandy American Cemetery to correct a 74-year-old error.

Then, they embarked on a noble mission to identify and rectify more cases of incorrect grave markers for Jewish American heroes of World War II, estimated by Lamm to be "in the low hundreds."

An so, "Operation Benjamin" was born – named in Garadetsky's honor — whose aim is " to locate Jewish personnel at American military cemeteries all over the world who, for various reasons, were buried under markers incorrectly representing their religion and heritage" and to "correct these mistakes and provide, these many decades later, comfort to

the families of the fallen…"

Thus far, Operation Benjamin has been successful in replacing eleven additional headstones. Among them, five Stars of David were rededicated to five Jewish American service members buried at the Manila American Cemetery in the Philippines. (Below)

This week, seven more Jewish-American troops buried in cemeteries across France, Belgium and Luxembourg were to have their markers replaced with Stars of David.

Why and how were such errors made?

There may be several reasons. Among them just the fog of war where honest (administrative) errors are made.

Some Jewish soldiers simply did not declare their religion when joining the military.

Dylan Gresik writes at *Military Times*: "During World War II, all U.S. troops had reason to fear falling into Nazi captivity — but some did more than others. Many American Jews who fought their way through France and into Belgium and Germany were painfully aware that they could face summary execution or worse if captured."

"Rededication" at Manila American Cemetery. (Photo courtesy American Battle Monuments Commission)

Gresik adds, "That led some Jewish-American troops to deface their dog tags in an effort to hide their religion if captured. Others simply said they were Christians when they first joined the military, hoping to avoid the issue altogether."

Whatever the reason for the wrong grave markings, for Schacter and Lamm, "recognition of these soldiers as both Jewish and American is central to Operation Benjamin's genesis.."

Schacter adds, "It is very important for us for a soldier who lived and died as an American be acknowledged for posterity as an American. It is also equally important for us that a soldier who lived and died as a Jew, be recognized as a Jew."

CODA: This story is based on two excellent articles by two equally excellent reporters to Military Times:

Davis Winkie's "Jewish troops who died in World War II finally receive Star of David headstones," Apr. 26, 2022.

Dylan Gresik's "How one organization is working to correct cases of Jewish WWII soldiers mistakenly buried under Latin Cross headstones" Feb. 21, 2020.

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Dorian de Wind is a retired U.S. Air Force officer and a writer. This article appeared initially on *The Moderate Voice* website, with which *San Diego Jewish World* trades stories under auspices of the San Diego Online News Association.

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