

Jewish WWII veterans get new tombstones with Stars of David

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A headstone bearing the Star of David of a Jewish World War I victim, inscribed "Here rests in honorable glory and an American soldier known only to God," at Brookwood American Military Cemetery, Surrey, England, on 26 May 2019. Throughout the history of the United States, Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines have given their lives in defense of the Nation. On Memorial Day, we pay solemn tribute to his ultimate sacrifice. (Jennifer Zima/Air Force)

When given the option of putting his religious identity on his metal dog tag, World War II soldier Albert Belmont did what many Jewish soldiers did at the time. His family members say he put a "P" for Protestant, fearing what Nazi German soldiers might do to him if they captured him.

For more than seven decades, Belmont was buried under a Latin cross, under which soldiers were generally buried unless they had an "H" on their dog tag for Hebrew. In April, however, his daughter and granddaughters traveled to France to see the cross on his body replaced by a Star of David to reflect his Jewish identity.

The changed Belmont headstone is part of a larger project called Operation Benjamin, which works to correct the headstones of hundreds of Jewish soldiers who died in World Wars I and II. Barbara Belmont, who lives in Alexandria, Virginia, and her two daughters joined six other families on a trip to Europe to participate in gravestone-changing ceremonies for her relatives.

"In a way, it gave this old lady some closure," said Belmont, 80. "I feel like I attended my father's funeral. It was the most wonderful feeling."

For most of his life, Belmont knew nothing about his biological father. He had died when she was 3 years old and her mother never wanted to talk about him because her death was too painful.

Albert Belmont had voluntarily enlisted as a private in the army when he was 32 years old, in 1944. He arrived in Europe on November 1, 1944, and was fatally shot within a month, on November 30.

Barbara Belmont said she visited her father's grave at the Lorraine American Cemetery 30 years ago while traveling for work, and remembers not seeing many Stars of David among the graves. She was busy raising her two daughters, so she never thought to do anything about the Latin cross on her grave.

During their recent trip to Operation Benjamin, some of the other families said they shared the Belmont experience: No one in their families talked about the soldiers who had died.

“Every time I played the song ‘When Johnny Comes Marching Home’ in elementary school, I would start crying,” Belmont said. “I don’t think I understood why this would happen.”

Belmont’s daughter, Erin McCahill, said she watched as her mother took a deep breath and commented that it would probably be the last time she would see her father’s grave. She said that she and her mother feel that his burial under a cross was not necessarily wrong, but that burying him under a Star of David was closer to right.

“For her, it’s less about how he was under a cross for 70 years,” said McCahill, who lives in Bethesda, Maryland. “It’s about reflecting what was closest to him.”

Operation Benjamin was created after Jacob Schacter, an Orthodox rabbi and Yeshiva University professor, led a tour of a cemetery in Normandy, France, in 2013. While there, Schacter looked around and thought the number of Star of David seemed low.

Shalom Lamm, executive director of Operation Benjamin, said he estimates that about 2.6% of American casualties in World War II were Jewish and therefore there should be about 250 Star of David headstones in the cemetery. Normandy, no 149.

He said they randomly chose a soldier who had been buried in Normandy and had a Jewish-sounding last name: Benjamin Garadetsky. They dug into his family history and discovered that he was a Ukrainian immigrant who grew up in the Bronx and led a Jewish life. After two years of work with the American Battle Monuments Commission, the US government agency that oversees foreign cemeteries for soldiers who died in both world wars,

Garadetsky's headstone was changed to a star. Dave in 2018.

Ali Bettencourt, a spokeswoman for the commission, said it has a unique relationship with Operation Benjamin because the tombstones are not changed often.

Bettencourt said that when the military was creating World War cemeteries, the Latin cross was not necessarily chosen for religious reasons. He said that it was intended to be a symbol that "someone died here for a reason." Killed soldiers were buried under a Latin cross by default, but at the time, the Jewish community asked the military to bury Jewish soldiers under a Star of David. However, there were cases like Albert Belmont's where soldiers wanted to hide his identity for security reasons, or sometimes there was a clerical error, Bettencourt said.

"We really want the story to come out right," he said.

Now, Lamm said, Operation Benjamin has a relationship with the commission where they know what evidence they need to confirm someone's Jewish identity — birth, census and bar mitzvah records, among others — and it takes about 30 days to get the approval. He said the group estimates there are between 400 and 550 veterans who are incorrectly buried under a Latin cross. So far there have been 19 headstone changes and corrections are being made for 27 more.

Some people ask why the bodies are not moved to Israel, but because the soldiers are part of a national monument, their bodies cannot be moved, Lamm said.

Barbara Belmont's mother, Ruth Bohm Belmont, met Albert Belmont in the mid-1930s when she was working for him at his photography studio in Youngstown, Ohio. After they married, they moved to Kansas City, Mo., where they had Barbara's older sister in 1937 and Barbara in 1941.

Ruth Bohm Belmont was a Reform Jew who went to synagogue on important holidays, but the family was not very observant. Barbara Belmont considers herself Jewish and believes in some kind of god but she does not belong to any institution. She said she was surprised when a St. Louis rabbi contacted her through an Operation Benjamin request. The group finds the closest relatives and often asks a rabbi to contact them.

Belmont's mother remarried when she was 6, to a World War II veteran, and never discussed her first husband with her daughter. When Belmont was a senior in high school, her grandmother sat down with her to tell her more about her father. She told him that he was a generous man, that if he had a penny in his pocket, he would give it to anyone. He gave thousands to the Red Cross, she said. They were going to talk more about him, but she died shortly after that initial conversation.

Belmont's uncle gave him a clipping from a newspaper in Syracuse, NY, where his family was from, which published an obituary with the headline "Pvt Albert Belmont, Jewish Fund Donor, Is Killed in Action." The obituary focused on his contributions to Jewish organizations, refugee efforts, and local charities.

The recent ceremony in France for her father lasted only about 15 minutes, she said.

Masonry workers had dug around the cross at his grave. During the ceremony, the workers took the cross and placed it next to the Star of David. Then they picked up the Star of David and put it where the cross had been. Belmont spoke about his father and each of her daughters read a sentence. They said the Kaddish, a Jewish prayer that is recited at funerals.

"I haven't felt like I've had a closure so far, that this has been continuous," Belmont said. "I probably know a sufficient amount of information where I understand who this man was. That makes me happy."

Jewish #WWII #veterans #tombstones #Stars #David [#Source](#) #Jewish WWII veterans get new tombstones with Stars of David