

Articles from
The Jewish
Veteran

The Official Publication of the Jewish War Veterans of the USA

Volume: 55, Year: 2002 · Number: 1, Season: Winter

A Ghost of Normandy

By Liz Doup

Lester Weiss was like thousands of young Americans who fought in World War II, fueled by courage and hope. And like so many others, he never returned.

Laid to rest in the American Cemetery at Omaha Beach on the coast of Normandy, France, Weiss was loved and mourned back home in Yonkers, N.Y. But, he remained a distant memory until last month.

On Aug. 24, Marjorie Kestenbaum, 60, who lives west of Boca Raton, FL, picked up the phone to hear about the uncle who shapes her earliest childhood memory. That's Uncle Lester, carrying little Marjorie high on his thin, angular shoulders, fixed forever in a black-and-white photo.



Uncle Lester, her mother's only sibling. Uncle Lester, dead at 24, shot from the sky over France in 1944.

On the other end of the line, Sid Selzer, 78, a soft-spoken retiree in San Diego, explained how he spent a year of his life stitching together pieces of Weiss' military life ... and death. A man he never knew.

Selzer's interest in putting a human face on a 60-year-old war comes on the heels of a barrage of World War II movies, best sellers and now the HBO miniseries, *Band of Brothers*, which portrays the horrific reality of combat.

As these real-life war veterans die, it's important to remember how, one by one, they changed the world.

"In life, we always talk about the big picture, but the big picture is made up of so many small components," Selzer says. "These small components matter. Sacrifices made by people like Lester Weiss really did make a difference. Without them, a way of life would have been destroyed. I don't want to sound dramatic, but we owe them everything." A search begins.

Like so many of his generation, Selzer wanted to walk among the war dead and give a silent, heartfelt thanks. He had spent the war years in the States, studying Japanese to become a military interpreter, and never set foot on a battleground.

Last October, in the drizzling rain, he stood surrounded by the 10,000 graves at Omaha Beach. In war, the big picture is obscured by the horror of battle, the thunder of weapons and the cold, raw fear of imminent death. But in the graveyard, where all is silent, the endless misery of war comes to life.

Men and women, dead before they really lived. Inconsolable mothers and devastated fathers. Countless children who never knew their father's touch. Lovers waiting for partners who never returned.

To Selzer, the sea of graves was a riveting, somber sight. He paused to rest by a marker and noticed its Jewish star amid so many Christian crosses. Selzer, who is Jewish, gazed at the inscription, First Lieutenant Lester Weiss, and wondered, "Who was that man?"

Armed with a typewriter and phone, Selzer started his hunt. He wrote to military officials, newspaper archives and museums. He contacted the pilot's widow in South Dakota; the bomb group's flight surgeon in Illinois and a gunner in California.

The pilot's widow sent her husband's memoirs and said he was forever haunted by the loss of his crew.

The flight surgeon wrote that he remembers Weiss waving goodbye as he left on the mission. Decades after the war, the flight surgeon visited Weiss' grave and "It just broke me up." And the gunner from California sent a copy of a letter, penned by the co-pilot a dozen years ago.

"They were not only good men inside that plane, but good friends," he wrote.

A FEW MEMORIES

Kestenbaum knew little about her uncle as an adult. Barely 3 when he died, she only recalls that joyful ride atop his shoulders.

Over the years, she was told he was outgoing, a little daring. Snipping a cow's tail at Cornell while in pre-vet studies got him bounced out of school. Kestenbaum thinks he had a girlfriend, who eventually married after the war.

Kestenbaum's sister, Lois Spritzler, 54, of New Jersey was born three years after Uncle Lester died and was named for him. Though her mother never saw her brother's grave, Spritzler did.

While studying abroad in 1966, she went to the cemetery, then wrote her mother these words:

Although I never knew Uncle Lester, it is impossible to have unattached feelings. I felt such a closeness that I cried while standing there and I can only say I am so proud to be named after him.

Typical of her generation, Lester Weiss' sister was stoic. She didn't talk about her brother and what his loss meant to her family, coming four years after their father's death.

"I didn't ask," Kestenbaum says. "I thought it was too painful."

But when their mother died in 1990, the sisters found a shoebox filled with Uncle Lester's things. His Purple Heart, other military medals and family photos. And a poignant letter from the man who tried desperately to save him, but could only watch him die.

SHOT FROM THE SKY

It is with the utmost regret that I write this letter ...

So begins the letter, dated June 9, 1945, from Jack Roberts, co-captain of Weiss' ill-fated plane, part of the 487th Bomb Group.

In a clear, steady hand on white, lined paper, he wrote about 72 B-24s flying from England to France to bomb a railroad yard near the Swiss border.

How their plane was hit with anti-aircraft fire 60 miles southwest of Paris. How the plane lost one engine, then another, dropping lower and lower in the sky. How the crew tried to lighten the load by ditching the bombs but the release mechanism jammed.

How they crashed in a wheat field, and he and the captain escaped through a broken window. How they tried to free the crew but the escape hatch was jammed. How they tried to put out the fire but couldn't. How the horrendous heat and flames finally pushed them back and the gasoline kept moving closer to the bombs.

"... and it was all over then."

A STRANGER'S QUEST

And so the sisters learned the details of their uncle's tragic end on May 11, 1944. But it wasn't all over then. Not yet.

A decade after their mother's death, a stranger got involved.

The more Selzer learned, the more Weiss came to life and the more he wanted to connect with the family. So he phoned Jewish Community Centers in Yonkers, looking for anyone with information on the Weiss family or Lester's sister, Sylvia Lazar, whose name was in the records.

Lazar was Marjorie Kestenbaum's mother. At one JCC, a man named Weiss, but no relation, knew the Lazar family and the pieces fell together. They connected by phone and Selzer heard the words: "I'm Lester Weiss' niece." Selzer was happy to hear her voice and her grateful reaction. He was, after all, digging into a stranger's life.

"But as you get on in years, you think of your own life and your contemporaries," he says. "In my own limited way, I felt like I was expressing my appreciation for what he and others did. I like to think it's something he might have appreciated."

Kestenbaum and her sister find it remarkable that someone who didn't know their uncle or even their family made such an effort. They hope to meet Selzer and his wife over Thanksgiving in New York, where they all have relatives.

"I feel like I found a new member of my family," Kestenbaum says.

In her kitchen, half a world away from her uncle's grave site, she holds tightly to a packet of papers, courtesy of Selzer. They contain the cool, detached military reporting of Weiss' demise and the warm, loving words of men who knew him.

Thanks to a perfect stranger, Uncle Lester, though dead nearly 60 years, has never seemed so alive.

Liz Doup is a staff writer for the Sun-Sentinel and can be reached at <mailto:ldoup@sun-sentinel.com> or 954-356-4722. Copyright protected by South Florida Sun-Sentinel, 2001. Publication Date: Wednesday, September 12, 2001, Edition: Broward Metro.

The Real War

By Thomas L. Friedman © New York Times. Reprinted by Permission, All Rights Reserved

If 9/11 was indeed the onset of World War III, we have to understand what this war is about. We're not fighting to eradicate "terrorism." Terrorism is just a tool. We're fighting to defeat an ideology: religious totalitarianism. World War II and the cold war were fought to defeat secular totalitarianism - Nazism and Communism - and World War III is a battle against religious totalitarianism, a view of the world that my faith must reign supreme and can be affirmed and held passionately only if all others are negated. That's bin Ladenism. But unlike Nazism, religious totalitarianism can't be fought by armies alone. It has to be fought in school, mosques, churches and synagogues, and can be defeated only with the help of imams, rabbis and priests.



The generals we need to fight this war are people like Rabbi David Hartman, from the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. What first attracted me to Rabbi Hartman when I reported from Jerusalem was his contention that unless Jews reinterpreted their faith in a way that embraced modernity, without weakening religious passion, and in a way that affirmed that God speaks multiple languages and is not exhausted by just one faith, they would have no future in the land of Israel. And what also impressed me was that he knew where the battlefield was. He set up his own schools in Israel to compete with fundamentalist Jews, Muslims and Christians, who used their schools to preach exclusivist religious visions.

After recently visiting the Islamic madrasa in Pakistan where many Taliban leaders were educated, and seeing the fundamentalist religious education the young boys there were being given, I telephoned Rabbi Hartman and asked: How do we battle religious totalitarianism?

He answered: "All faiths that come out of the biblical tradition - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - have the tendency to believe that they have the exclusive truth. When the taliban wiped out the Buddhist statues, that's what they were saying. But others have said it too. The opposite of religious totalitarianism is an ideology of pluralism - an ideology that embraces religious diversity and the idea that my faith can be nurtured without claiming exclusive truth. America is the Mecca of that ideology, and that is what bin Laden hates and that is why America had to be destroyed."

The future of the world may well be decided by how we fight this war. Can Islam, Christianity and Judaism know that God speaks Arabic on Fridays, Hebrew on Saturdays and Latin on Sundays, and that he welcomes different human beings approaching him through their own history, out of their languages and cultural heritage? "Is single-minded fanaticism a necessity for passion and religious survival, or can we have a multilingual view of God - a notion that God is not exhausted by just one religious path?" asked Rabbi Hartman.

Many Jews and Christians have already argued that the answer to that question is yes, and some have gone back to their sacred texts to reinterpret their traditions to embrace modernity and pluralism, and to create space for secularism and alternative faiths. Others - Christians and Jewish fundamentalists - have rejected this notion, and that is what the battle is about in their faiths.

What is different about Islam is that while there have been a few attempts at such a reformation, none have flowered or found the support of a Muslim state. We patronize Islam, and mislead ourselves, by repeating the mantra that Islam is a faith with no serious problems accepting the secular West, modernity and pluralism, and the only problem is a few bin Landens. Although there is a deep moral impulse in Islam for justice, charity and compassion, Islam has not developed a dominant religious philosophy that allows equal recognition of alternative faith communities. Bin Laden reflects the most extreme version of that exclusivity, and he hit us in the face with it on 9/11.

Christianity and Judaism struggled with this issue for centuries, but a similar internal struggle within Islam to re-examine its texts and articulate a path for how one can accept pluralism and modernity - and still be a passionate, devout Muslim - has not surfaced in any serious way. One hopes that now that the world spotlight has been put on this issue, mainstream Muslims too will realize that their future in this integrated, globalized world depends on their ability to reinterpret their past.

America Wakes Up to Bioterrorism

By Leonard A. Cole

September 11, 2001 will long be remembered as a day of sadness and horror. But another date, October 4, carries its own dark resonance. On that day, just three weeks after the assault against the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, 63-year-old Robert Stevens, a Florida photojournalist, was diagnosed with anthrax. When he died the following day, he became the first known fatality caused by bioterrorism in the United States. During the following weeks, 10 more people became ill with inhalation anthrax, four of whom died. As many as 11 others suffered from the far less dangerous cutaneous form of anthrax.



As would soon become evident, almost all the cases could be traced to the mail. At least four letters had been mailed that contained anthrax spores. Infections arose from direct contact with these letters or indirectly from other mail or areas that were contaminated by spores from the original letters. People became infected in the offices to which the letters were addressed. Postal workers came down with the disease from spores that leaked from the poisoned letters when they went through sorting machines. The vulnerability of American citizens to biological terrorism was now unarguable.

The new reality has prompted heightened government action to combat this scourge. Before the end of 2001, Congress voted to add nearly \$3 billion to enhance the nation's ability to protect Americans against bioterrorism. A series of initiatives announced by Secretary of Health and Human Services, Tommy Thompson, including speeding up production of anthrax vaccine and a program to stockpile smallpox vaccine doses for every citizen. The newly-created office of Homeland Defense, under former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, would be seeking further measures to protect against bio-attacks.

While all these plans were welcome, many citizens continued to worry. Months after the outbreak began, the perpetrator of the anthrax attacks was still unknown. Anxiety was heightened by the fact that perhaps thousands of letters had been infected through cross-contamination. Anthrax spores are highly durable and may exist for decades or centuries in a dormant state. But they are ever ready to become active reproducing organisms in a warm, moist environment like the human lung. Yet while potentially lethal to an infected person, anthrax does not spread by human to human transmission.

Other potential bioweapons, however, are highly contagious. Smallpox, which kills about 30 percent of its victims, can be caught just by being near an infected person. The disease was eradicated from the earth more than 25 years ago after a world-wide vaccination effort. But now there is worry that beyond the two known repositories where smallpox virus are stored - in the US and Russia - outlaw countries including Iran and North Korea may possess illegal quantities.

A striking paradox about biological weapons is that while they can be terrifying, many can be easily defended against. Vaccines exist that can protect against anthrax, plague and smallpox. Antibiotics are effective for a variety of bacterial infections. Moreover, with advance warning, a gas mask could assure protection, since damage occurs only if the

microorganism is inhaled. To be sure, no protective measure is perfect. Vaccines may have side effects, antibiotics are not always effective, and donning a gas mask after the germs are inhaled would be too late. Still, with the help of government-backed research, we are likely to see improvements in medical defenses and other relevant technologies, such as enhanced detection devices.

Meanwhile, we should not overlook another valuable instrument to discourage the use of biological agents as weapons: moral repugnance. Using these weapons has been called public health in reverse. No wonder that civilized nations have viewed them as especially abhorrent, and their use a violation of international morality. Provisions to strengthen the treaty that bans these weapons deserve support. We would all be better off if any country, group or individual that violates the norm against developing or using these weapons was deemed a pariah and subject to severe punishment.

Leonard A. Cole is a bioterrorism expert in the political science department at Rutgers University in Newark. He is author, most recently, of *The Eleventh Plague: The Politics Of Biological and Chemical Warfare* (W.H. Freeman Publishers, 1998). Mr. Cole is also Chairman of the J.C.P.A.