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A Message From The Commander

By Daniel Weiss

Two recent events crystallized in my mind the meaning of remembrance and how memories have shaped our behavior.

I attended Remembrance Day ceremonies in London a few months ago. Invited by our friends at AJEX, and by members of the British veterans community, this event pays homage to the memories of those British men and women who gave their lives for the Crown and for freedom.

Amidst the pomp and pageantry that is a part of any ceremony honoring a nation's fighting men and women, I was struck by the sheer number of people who participated in this event. Hundreds of veterans, mostly from World War II, marched in less than ideal conditions and paid their respects to fallen comrades. It amazed me how, despite age or infirmity, these veterans attended this event and stayed throughout the entire ceremonies. I don't know whether it is because the war affected Great Britain directly, or because the whole fabric of British society was affected, but these veterans knew how important it was to keep the memories of their comrades alive. To them, remembrance is of paramount importance and regardless of time and age; they made it their business to be a part of the ceremonies.

I compare this to Veterans Day, which took place shortly before my trip to London. I was a guest of President Bush at the White House, and attended the annual Veterans Day ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery. As usual the speeches were elegant, and the rites that were done in memory of our fallen men and women were poignant.

Yet, the level of remembrance given at each ceremony struck me. In Britain, it seemed as if the entire country stopped for a few minutes and paid homage to its heroes. In the United States, schools remained in session; people went about their business, and the rain kept many away from Arlington that day.

I don't write to criticize how we as American commemorate Veterans Day. Perhaps it is because we were never subjected to a blitzkrieg, or that our skies were not invaded by enemy aircraft, yet two buildings in New York were destroyed by terror, or that we never had to spend nights underground away from constant bombardments, that our feelings toward remembrances of war past is not as personal as those of our British brethren. One can only wonder how many survived the constant bombing that were a regular part of Hitler's plan to destroy England.



No, I'm talking about the way we choose to remember the sacrifices of our veterans. Often times, we have to urge and plead with our members to take part in Veterans Day or Memorial Day ceremonies. Many past meetings have been cancelled due to lack of interest. Soliciting volunteers to partake in events in the community is met with apathy. Worse, our own members sparsely attend events that JWV sponsors.

We don't advertise ourselves as veterans of the United States. Instead, we let other advertise their service. How many times has a news article or television report mentioned the JWV, VFW or the American Legion in its coverage of Veterans Day or Memorial Day events? Whenever the press needs a comment regarding a story involving veterans, why is it that the local representative of the Legion, VFW, or Disabled American Veterans is where they turn? Why is it that many Jewish veterans don't even know we exist in their communities?

Remembrance. It's important to remember our past. You, as members of JWV, are survivors of the past. Whether you fought in the fields of Europe, the islands of the Pacific, the mountains of Korea, the jungles of Southeast Asia, the deserts of the Middle East, or had an important job here at home, you all have memories that can be shared. You all have experience that can be told. Our memories are no different than our comrades in the VFW and the American Legion. It is how we choose to remember these experiences that is the difference.

I ask all of you to not only be visible on those days that we, as veterans, are expected to show ourselves. But, to make everyday a day that recalls the legacy of our fighting men and women. Whether it is talks at community centers, educational programs at local schools, or lectures at the local synagogue, make your remembrances special. We have a wonderful and important story to tell. Don't let our memories fade away without others knowing what we did. In this vein, I'd also like to thank all those echelons that have invited me to speak at the various functions. It's an honor to come speak to you and hear your concerns on how best to improve this organization. However, I'm preaching to the choir! You know what JWV is and what we stand for. You are an integral part of the success of this organization. I need not talk to you about what we are and what we do. But, however, I do need to talk to others. There are countless community groups, Jewish organizations and fellow veterans that don't know we exist, or worse don't know anything about us. These are the people I want to talk to when I come to your community. I want to tell the people about this great organization and the membership I represent.

As I mentioned in my last column, there is a rise in anti-Semitism taking place in this country. What better way to counteract these negative images, then by showing how JWV fights for the rights of all America, regardless of religion? So, I ask that when I speak in your community, please make an effort for me to address groups other than the ones that normally come to hear a national commander. The national office has draft invitation letters, and can work with you in deciding where it is best that I speak. Also, don't hesitate to contact me and recommend groups that might want to hear about who we are, and what we have done in defense of this nation.

A Sedar in Tokyo - Thanks to Gen. Douglas MacArthur

By Harry Burgeman, JWV Post 258

I was a 1st Lieutenant in the U.S. Army and I had arrived in the Philippines in September, 1945, just as World War II had ended. I was waiting to be discharged when to my great surprise, I received orders to fly to Japan to serve on Gen. Douglas MacArthur's staff. I arrived there in January, 1946.

My impression of Gen. MacArthur, at this time, was one of tremendous respect. But, like many other G.I.s, I felt he was pompous and a man with a great vanity. This was



soon to be confirmed to me. During my first week in Tokyo, as a courier, I had to deliver some documents to Gen. MacArthur's office which was located in the Dai Itchi building, Japan's largest structure.

As I was walking up the stairs, a 2nd Lieutenant approached me and told me that Gen. MacArthur would be in the area. If I saw him that I should immediately come to attention with a hand salute. "Of course, I will comply," I told him.

My respect and admiration for Gen. MacArthur grew as I witnessed the way he handled his job as the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in the Pacific. His policy during the Occupation of Japan was one of firmness, but also of respect and dignity toward the Japanese people.

With Passover arriving in April, 1946, I was happy to learn that Gen. MacArthur was inviting all the Jewish G.I.s and officers in the Pacific area to a Seder in his building.

There were over 1,000 of us seated at long tables. Each person had a Hagadah, a bottle of Manischewitz wine and a one pound box of matzo (which kept me going for the rest of the holiday). There was chicken soup with matzo balls and all the trimmings for a festive Passover meal; thanks to the Jewish Welfare Board.

At the Seder there were 12 Jewish Chaplains; Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. Many of us present were asked to participate. The singing didn't end until midnight. To me it was a memorable and happy Seder.

My assignment on Gen. MacArthur's staff was chief of an auditing team. We visited the various P.X.s in Japan and rendered financial and statistical reports to Headquarters in Tokyo.

One of our trips took us South where we had the occasion to stop off at Hiroshima. This was in March, 1946, some months after the bomb was dropped.

The city was completely destroyed. People were living in tin shacks under the most primitive conditions.

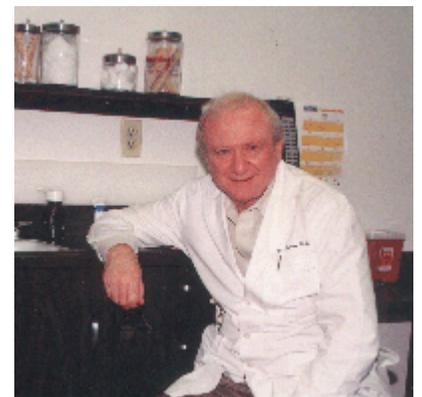
The Seder in Japan and Hiroshima will always be my important memories of World War II.

An Army Doctor in Vietnam

By Marc Phillip Yablonka, Military Affairs Correspondent

U.S. Army Captain Doctor Eugene Fishman, who was born in City Terrace, one of L.A.'s two Jewish neighborhoods until the late 1950's, had been in Vietnam only two months when the Bell UH-1 he was flying in down Highway 1 ("friendly territory") from Nha Trang to Cam Ranh Bay, took a round in its rotor, forcing the pilot to auto rotate the helicopter to the ground.

"I remember the pilot saying, 'Hold on, I'm taking her down,'" said Fishman. "It was an unconscious feeling: I didn't think we were going to die. I knew the helicopter could feather it." Dr. Fishman and the others aboard were lucky. Thanks to the pilot, they landed safely and were evacuated out on another chopper. Terrifying as it must have been, Fishman's experience was soon alleviated by the sort of humor combat veterans deem necessary. As he later described it: "I remember turning to my medic afterwards and saying, 'I feel so embarrassed. I wet in my pants.' He turned to me and said, 'Don't feel bad, Doc, I wet mine also!'"



Fishman, who had never been out of his native Los Angeles before being assigned to Duty Station Vietnam, was considered one of the “old guys” when the then 27-year-old physician hit the beach, World War II style, in a Navy landing craft at Cam Ranh Bay in 1966. “When we landed, we pitched our tents in the sand,” he remembered. “obviously, a buildup was happening. Cam Ranh was turning into a major port.”

The next morning Fishman got a hell of an awakening. To shake up the new arrivals, a GI discharged dynamite in the distance. “And, of course, we turned around and did it to someone else the next day,” he laughed. He was soon off to the arid Top Cham Hindu region of Vietnam, where he ran a nonsurgical dispensary unit for GIs at the 101st Airborne Division compound at Phan Rang Air Force Base. They moved in on the 101st, since the Airborne were always out on patrol, according to Fishman. Humor abounded, but Vietnam quickly became Vietnam.

With a standard-issue sidearm holster on his hip, Fishman would often go out on Medical Civil Action Program (MEDGAP) operations in the area near Phan Rang to dispense medicines to the indigenous population and to set up public health programs. MEDCAP missions included treating sick village chiefs and providing entire villages with anti-malarial medication, topical creams for a variety of skin conditions and antibiotics.

Pondering those patrols, Fishman later recalled how villagers would often invent reasons to see him, such as pinching their skin until it bruised. Culturally, it was an honor to be treated by the Baa Si Hoa Ky (American doctors), and, so villagers thought, it would have been insulting not to respect their presence with a visit. Fishman marveled at the often-traded story among Vietnam doctors of walking down a hill, only to turn around to witness villagers trading little blue pills for little yellow ones.

“It wasn’t altogether altruistic,” Fishman now concedes. “We wanted to provide American personnel with a safe-as-could-be environment.” To that end, Fishman, now a 61-year-old Los Angeles internist, also implemented a system whereby an American GI who contracted venereal disease could identify the prostitute who gave it to him and keep the hooker off the streets until she was cured.

“Every town in South Vietnam had its strip with the “Hollywood Bar”, “New York Bar,” he recalled. “When a GI came in with a case of VD, he would be asked who his sexual contact had been. Invariably he would say, “She was about 5 feet tall, had long black hair and slanted eyes, and I met her at the Playboy Bar.”

Of course, that description matched practically every woman in Vietnam, “working girl” or not. So Doc Fishman saw to it that prostitutes were given photo IDs with their name, a number and the club in which they worked. If a GI then got VD, the notorious “White Mice” (South Vietnamese police) would pay the girl a visit, get her treated by Vietnamese doctors and require that she stay out of the bars for 10 days.

While it was true that evacuation hospital medical personnel worked from one dustoff to the next, carting traumatized soldiers with head, limb or torso wounds off helicopters and into surgery, Fishman believes most of the doctoring done in Vietnam paralleled the type of work he did and that many Americans have a misconception about physicians who served there. “The war wounded went to field hospitals set up for major trauma,” he said, “but most people don’t understand that most docs were in fairly safe areas treating run-of-the-mill colds, skin infections, diarrhea and self-induced injuries like accidental gunshot wounds.”

“I’d heard about it from my brother’s roommate, who was the liaison officer at Travis Air Force Base,” Fishman recalled. “He advised me to change out of my fatigues. I did, took the bus to San Francisco and flew home to L.A.” Fishman has visited the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C., several times during conferences he has attended at the Bethesda Naval Hospital but does not plan to do so again. “It’s just too painful I can’t do it anymore,” he said, holding back tears. “I know some names on that wall, but it’s not a matter of knowing the names. It’s just so powerful seeing them.

Fishman stated, Vietnam completely changed the rest of my life. Before Vietnam, I had been offered a fellowship at the National Cancer Institute in hematology/oncology. If I hadn't gone [to Vietnam], I would have ended up as an oncologist and hate it!" When asked if Vietnam had given him his sense of compassion, Fishman was not sure. "I guess after Vietnam I knew that I had seen enough of death and dying."