

Articles from
The Jewish
Veteran

The Official Publication of the Jewish War Veterans of the USA

Volume: 57, Year: 2004 · Number: 4, Season: Summer

Letter from Afghanistan

By LTC Susan Meisner, Post 10 Jersey City New Jersey

The Army called me up in March 2004. I had about five weeks' notice that I was going to MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, and I spent the next couple of weeks thinking I was going to work in the Central Command Public Affairs Office. Then I received orders to 10th Mountain Division at Ft. Drum, New York. I was two weeks from deploying when I found out my real destination was Kabul, Afghanistan, and that I was recalled as a logistics officer, a specialty I hadn't worked in since 1991. I was fortunate in the limited time I had to find a babysitter for my three-year-old daughter to help my husband in my absence. Both of our families live far away (Florida and Nebraska).



Once on the ground I ultimately became the public affairs officer for the Office of Military Cooperation-Afghanistan. I spent six weeks in that job before being pulled up to be the Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan Public Affairs Officer. I am still on the same compound, Kabul, but on the other side.

Our compound is very small and consists of what was once luxury homes (there are many dry fountains and a lot of rose bushes), supplemented by conexes—the metal-type boxes used for freight—that we're using for additional living quarters and office space. Others live off the compound in what we call safe houses. These are locally owned leased homes. The living and working conditions are very crowded and there is limited room for expansion. The environment is very dry and dusty, but we are at 5,900 feet altitude so the heat isn't as oppressive as it is elsewhere in Afghanistan and as it certainly is in Iraq.

We don't have much by way of facilities, although conditions are improving every day. We conduct official business off the compound, but the restaurants and stores are generally off limits. We have a small PX that is struggling to establish its supply line, a barber shop, a small gym and a few phones, computers and Nintendo hookups. That's it. We eat all our meals in our dining facilities and are looking forward to the letting of a new food contract and service provider—hopefully sooner than later.

The conditions outside our compound are appalling, although there is much construction and with it, hope. The average Afghan is lucky to have a roof over his or her head; clean water, indoor plumbing and electricity are luxuries out of reach of most. Poverty has a new meaning after being here. The infrastructure is badly broken and the Government of Afghanistan is working hard to fix it. Our focus is on stability and security operations in support of democratic elections in October and the rebuilding of the country. Traffic downtown is a combination of overcrowded taxis, trucks, cars, water buffalo, sheep, goats, pedestrians and bicycles, all trying to negotiate the same intersections without lights,

signage or direction. Afghan National Police are trying to establish some control, but it's largely a free-for-all. You force your way through intersections using your horn and a lot of nerve.

I've attached one of the photos I've taken since I'm here—an Afghan girl.

The Family Hero

By Capt. David A. Isquith, USN (Ret.)

Every family, especially every Jewish family, should have its own real, live hero. Why? Because most of the "heroes" in Jewish history were martyrs, and very few, if any, were personally around to benefit from being the family's pride and joy. My family's hero, and a hero to thousands of Jews throughout the country, was Uncle Sol.



Solomon Silas Isquith, the number two son of seven boys and two girls born of the rather prolific marriage of Abraham and Pearl Itskovitz was the first to break tradition in the Brooklyn family. What nice Jewish boy, I ask you, would ever want to join the Navy, let alone think of entering the U.S. Naval Academy and becoming a professional naval officer? Uncle Sol, all 5 foot, 4 inches of him, was that nice, little Jewish boy.

Sol's first attempt to pass the physical for the U.S. Naval Academy was a bust. No question about it: he was too short. Prior to reporting for a second attempt at passing the physical, he spent the night with flat irons tied to his ankles and hung over the end of the bed. Sol may have been short in build, but he wasn't short on intelligence. He realized that the human form shrinks during the day due to gravity; thus, flat irons or no, he would be at his tallest early in the morning, and he was. Sol, "Little Izzy" to his classmates, was accepted into the Class of 1920.

After being commissioned an Ensign in 1919—the class was graduated a year early due to WWI—Sol served in river gunboats, destroyers, cruisers and battleships in the Far East and European arenas. At the outbreak of WWII he was in the Pacific Fleet, a Lt. Commander and the commanding officer of the old battleship, USS UTAH, home ported at Pearl Harbor. The UTAH was used as a target ship for dive bombing practice—using dummy bombs, of course—by the U.S. Army Air Corps. The UTAH, mistaken by the Japanese intelligence to be an aircraft carrier at the anchorage, was the first ship sunk during the Japanese attack on December 7, 1941. As the UTAH heeled over, Sol escaped through a porthole. Once clear of his ship, he organized a team of survivors and, while under fire from enemy aircraft, crossed the harbor in a small boat to ships that had "turned Turtle" (capsized). Once alongside, he and his team, with torches, cut holes through the capsized hulls, allowing trapped crewmembers to escape. For his heroism under fire, saving not only over 90 percent of the crew of the UTAH through his leadership and crews from other ships in the harbor, Sol was awarded the Navy Cross—second only to the Medal of Honor—and the Purple Heart.

Following the attack and promoted to the rank of Commander, Sol was placed in charge of salvage operations at Pearl Harbor. His engineering expertise in successfully raising sunken warships earned him further decorations. Following this assignment, he went on to command several ships in the Pacific Theater, was elevated to the rank of Captain and Commanding Officer of the troop ship, USS NOBLE, then to the flag rank of Commodore as SOPA (Senior Officer Present Afloat) over a division of troop ships. He was ultimately promoted to Rear Admiral and assigned as Commander, Brooklyn Naval Ship Yard prior to retirement after thirty years of service. During the naval career, Sol also completed law school and was responsible for authoring sections of the Navy's Manual for Courts Martial.

Rear Admiral Isquith, USN (Ret.) was a major fundraiser for War Bonds and an active participant in and leading spokesman for the Jewish War Veterans. Sol was also credited with being the first to propose the concept of national defense, which has now come to be the Department of Homeland Security.

In 2002, U.S. Representatives Wexler and Gilman submitted the names of several highly decorated Jewish WWII veterans, my Uncle Sol included, to the Secretary of Defense for reevaluation and possible upgrading of their awards to the Medal of Honor. The submission was based on promotional bias against Jewish service members prior to and during the war and was due to persistent anti-Semitism. Pre-WWII promotions were slow for sure; however, taking 22 years for an Annapolis graduate to reach the rank of Lieutenant Commander was more than simply suspicious. It is gratifying to note that major strides have been made in the increased recognition of Jewish officers in the naval profession today, and I am delighted that for the first time in the history of the U.S. Naval Academy, a Jewish presence—the Commodore Uriah P. Levy Center and Jewish Chapel—is being constructed on the grounds. This is the first and, thus far, the only religious facility at the Academy other than the traditionally Protestant Memorial Hall. I like to believe that my uncle—one of the few Jews ever to reach flag rank in the U.S. Navy—was a catalyst in this recognition.