

Jared Frederick's Veterans Memorial Service Address, May 26 2022

Of the 550,000 Jewish Americans who served their country in World War II, several are buried in this cemetery. These local individuals, not to be found in any history books, waged a struggle for their nation and for Jewish people worldwide. "Like most Americans, they fought against fascism, but they also waged a more personal fight—to save their brethren in Europe. Jewish servicemen were also among the first to assist the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps liberated by American troops. After years of struggle, these soldiers emerged transformed, more powerfully American and more deeply Jewish, determined to continue the fight for equality and tolerance at home."

Their crusade was not without dispute or skepticism on the part of their non-Jewish fellow citizens. An April 1938 Gallup poll showed that 54% of Americans felt "the persecution of the Jews in Europe has been partly their own fault." Right after Kristallnacht in November 1938, 72% of Americans polled replied "no" to the question, "Should we allow a larger number of Jewish exiles from Germany to come to the United States to live?" These sentiments reveal to us the two front war many buried within this cemetery confronted.

When asked to come speak with you this evening, I was naturally inclined to investigate the lives and exploits of several veterans who rest here. The hard reality of war is that not all of them perished gallantly while facing their tyrannical foes on the battlefield. Private Judah Covitch, originally from Ebensburg, succumbed to a brief illness at age 18 while stationed at Fort McClellan, Alabama, in September 1943. His passing serves as a harsh reminder that even by the 1940s, tens of thousands of Americans in uniform died of illness and not bullets.

As America's war expanded, so did the local casualty count. On August 7, 1944, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Small received a telegram from the War Department indicating their son, Meyer, age 22, had been killed while fighting in the hedgerows of Normandy on July 1. The couple hoped the report was a clerical error since they had received letters from their son dated after July 1. Their optimism was in vain. Their son had been killed in the fighting beyond Carentan, France as the Allies pushed inland from the Normandy beaches. Small's remains rested in a temporary overseas cemetery until 1948. When the war ended, families of the fallen had three options: leave their sons or daughters in overseas cemeteries, repatriate them to a stateside national cemetery, or have them reburied in a local cemetery. Small's remains returned to Altoona and were buried here on July 20, 1948.

By September 1944, Paris had been liberated and the Germans were being pushed out of France. Participating in the chase was Barney Getz of the 80th Division's 305th Medical Battalion. Barney grew up only a few blocks from here on 18th Street and, as I recently discovered, served in the same battalion as my uncle, Fred Weakland, who grew up only minutes away on 13th Avenue. Fred lived to be 100 but Barney was killed in combat on September 6, 1944. His remains were returned to America one year after Meyer Small's.

And the list goes on: Harold Sykes, serving as a machine gunner with the First Army during the dreadful Battle of the Bulge, was reported missing in action in January 1945 and later confirmed to have been killed on December 21, 1944. Private Max Cazen, age 18, like Judah Covitch, passed away from a weeklong illness at a stateside base. Lt. Stanley A. Baron, age 24, an officer in the 819th Amphibious Truck Company, was killed in a vehicular accident while going about his duties at the port of Marseilles, France on August 8, 1945—just one day before the atomic bomb over Nagasaki would be dropped and the war would come to an end.

When I ponder the service of Altoona's Jewish veterans, I cannot help but also think of my Uncle Fred who, although a devout Catholic, grew up with many Jewish neighbors and served alongside Jewish comrades like Barney Getz. Fred witnessed something Barney did not, something he could never forget. In April 1945, their division was the first American unit to liberate a concentration camp: Ohrdruf. A reluctant thirtysomething draftee and former teacher who hated military life, Fred was suddenly awakened by the nightmare that his Jewish buddies had much longer been conscious of. Viewing heaps of charred and emaciated corpses, Fred soon after wrote home: "If I ever get back to teaching, I will be able to teach democracy much better after what I saw today. It took a little guts to look at the sight, but I felt I wanted to be educated in some of the principles of the Germans. It gave me a funny feeling to go through the gates and be within the wire fence that held so many and where so much suffering was done." Wishing to bear witness to the atrocity, Fred snapped a dozen photos with this camera so he would long remember what he saw.

Dwight Eisenhower was likewise a proponent of remembering the Holocaust and the toll inflicted in its defeat. As the old general gazed out upon the 9,388 tombstones of the Normandy American Cemetery in 1964, he confessed, "I devoutly hope that we will never again have to see such scenes as these. I think and hope and pray that humanity will learn more than we had learned up to that time. But these people gave us a chance, and they bought time for us, so that we can do better than we have before."

World War II formally ended 77 years ago, but it is also still being waged. Fewer countries are free now than 20 years ago. Authoritarianism is on the march again. Eastern Europe is once more a contested military borderland. In our own country, attempts at voter suppression, a spike in hate crimes, and a troublesome revival of the “America First” mantra harken back to the dark and uncertain times of the 1930s and 1940s.

General Eisenhower was right. These men and women bought time for us. The question is, what will we do with our second chance? That remains the great moral question as we honor the fallen this Memorial Day. Thank you.