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— World War II —

MEN OF HONOR

*American GIs in the
Jewish Holocaust*

Jeff Donaldson



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Men of Honor

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*This book is dedicated to my grandfather, Turner L. Canady Sr.,
and to Ed Cornell, whose heroic actions at Stalag IX-B
(Bad Orb) helped motivate this project.*

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Introduction

When I was a teenager, my grandfather told me a story of how his unit fought from Italy into Germany during World War II. His artillery division stopped in a small German town and the GIs commandeered a house belonging to a woman and her two scared little girls. My grandfather was a kind man who offered the youngest of the daughters a chocolate bar to ease her fears. Years later during a reunion, he returned to Germany to find the house. Of course, the woman had long since passed and the daughter who received the candy bar had moved to the United States to become a college professor. Sometime later, my grandfather located the woman and arranged to visit. They shared the story of the Hershey's chocolate and talked of those times.

My grandfather's story was the kind of tale I believe one associates with World War II stories. They are heroic stories—accounts of men who overcame terrific obstacles to survive combat; of those who rescued fallen soldiers in the heat of the battle; men who bailed out of burning airplanes or jumped off sinking ships; and of those who survived horrific treatment in enemy hospitals and prisoner-of-war camps. As a journalist, one meets many veterans who tell of experiences that often sound like the kinds of things that war movies are made of. Even my uncle's stories about fighting the Viet Cong in Vietnam during the Tet Offensive tantalized my young mind with feelings of glory, patriotism and honor.

But in 1995, I heard a World War II story unlike any I'd ever encountered. Ed Cornell, an infantryman who now lives in Arizona, had been captured during the Battle of the Bulge. He was taken to a prisoner-of-war camp where Jewish soldiers were segregated and later sent to slave labor in a German mining operation. At the urging of his comrades, he discarded his dog tags, which had the letter "H"—for Hebrew—on them. Ed's friends convinced him to not admit to being Jewish or to subject himself to segregation. He talks today of coping with nearly sixty years of guilt brought on by his decision to remain behind while other Jewish prisoners were shipped out.

I could not imagine how a twenty- or twenty-one-year-old man could be asked to make such a choice. How does one deny their heritage and beliefs? How does a nineteen-year-old soldier who has been thrust into a life-and-death situation in war choose to turn his back on religious traditions that go back centuries and the ideals that he'd been raised with? And how does a person face others who have the same religious heritage, knowing that they had to sacrifice everything—making the choice to stand up for their beliefs when others did not?

More than 500,000 Jewish Americans served in the military during World War II. While it can be said that only a small percentage of those became prisoners of war, the number of soldiers who were affected by the Nazis' persecution of Jewish people was much greater, says Dr. Mitchell Bard, an author and executive director of the non-profit American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise.

Jewish soldiers were told to throw away their dog tags if they were captured so the Nazis would not know their religion. Some did, though they feared they would be shot as spies. Others felt the Germans would have records on them that would reveal their religion so concealing it was futile.

"When they were captured, there certainly was an awareness that those who were Jewish were at greater risk," says Bard, who authored *Forgotten Victims: The Abandonment of Americans in Hitler's Camps*. "Some of them would hide their dog tags, or trade them—their buddies would help them. They knew that a Jewish soldier taken off for interrogation by the Gestapo faced a great danger."

There exists a large number of movies and books about World War II, the Holocaust and the treatment of prisoners in Nazi Germany's POW

camps. The late documentary filmmaker Charles Guggenheim even produced a film about the men that Ed Cornell described who were sent from Stalag IX-B at Bad Orb to slave labor in Berga. But, there has been little mentioned of the American soldiers—some Jewish, some not—who experienced the atrocities of the Holocaust first hand. Of the nearly 140,000 American soldiers who were captured or listed as missing-in-action during World War II, there were thousands who were subjected to the same torture, starvation and genocide that befell the Jewish people in concentration camps. There were many more who witnessed the results of this mistreatment when liberating these camps in late April 1945.

Bard has interviewed hundreds of soldiers, including those who were sent to Berga, airmen who were segregated at camps like Stalag Luft I, and even OSS agents who were incarcerated at the concentration camps at Mauthausen.

“The treatment of Jewish prisoners had a big impact on soldiers during World War II,” Bard says. “It shows that what happened to Jews wasn’t just happening to other people far away. You could be a Jew from anywhere, even an American soldier, and the Nazis would take you out and exterminate you.”

But why haven’t we heard more about these men? Nearly every soldier who was either imprisoned in a concentration camp or a POW camp where Jews were segregated was forced to sign an affidavit after their release agreeing not to discuss what they had experienced. The reason, perhaps, was that 1940’s America could not readily explain why the world sat back and permitted the extermination of eleven million people. But by forcing these soldiers’ silence, the anger and pain from years of malnourishment and physical as well as emotional abuse has left scarring that many GIs are only now beginning to cope with towards the end of their lives. Many more soldiers have yet to say a word—but the chaos still burns within them.

“All combat veterans experience stress reactions to life-threatening situations, but being a POW added a whole new dimension,” says William P. Mahedy, a retired military chaplain who assists veterans through a Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome clinical team at the Veteran’s Affairs hospital in San Diego, California.

“POWs are completely helpless—they’ve had their weapons and their freedom taken away. But the Jewish veteran would have it even tougher. For all soldiers, more than half of the medical problems that came out of

World War II were psychiatric. As you get older, that stuff doesn't go away," Mahedy says.

I had to know more.

Though I am not of the Jewish faith, I wanted to try to understand what it meant to these men to be forced to make a choice to deny their religion. I wanted to give these soldiers a chance to tell their stories, so that the truth could finally be known. In offering a sounding board, I hope to encourage other soldiers who haven't yet come forward to find ways to cope with the frustration they've felt. I also wanted to give future generations a chance to understand what Holocaust history should mean to Americans—that it was not just a European event that holds a place in a history book. It shaped men's lives in many ways and affected the way they raised their families, though many of their own children never even heard the stories.

These are men who were taken out; separated from their comrades. They were imprisoned at some of Germany's most notorious concentration camps: Dachau, Auschwitz and Buchenwald, as well as POW camps where Jews were often isolated from other prisoners. They also were the men who tore down the gates of these camps, freeing the people from the horrors inside. And yet, like the prisoners, they have spent almost six decades trying to make some kind of sense of the insane treatment Hitler visited upon Jews and the "unwanted" of Europe.

By the end of the war, all prisoners faced extermination as Hitler's final order gave the SS broad authority to carry out executions. But with hundreds of thousands of men and women being shipped south ahead of the Allied advancement, the numbers became too overwhelming for the Germans to handle. Outside Stalag VII-A, near Moosburg, Bavaria, the 14th Armored Division took out an entire German SS division that was en route to the camp on the morning of April 29, 1945. Those actions saved literally thousands of troops from certain death.

I wanted to try to understand. I felt a need to hear these stories—not just as a journalist but as a veteran, and as a young Protestant man who may never have to experience the fear of religious persecution. As an Air Force veteran who received POW training (and who learned some of what these men faced in the camps), I also wanted to try to understand what it means to have your country express disbelief in your stories or insist that you never talk about your experiences. The government then did not stand with these

men as they have stood with each other now. I wanted to share these stories so that others can understand the true meaning of their unity.

Ross Supnik was one of those soldiers—he was captured during the Battle of the Bulge and eventually taken to Stalag IX-B at Bad Orb.

When he arrived at the camp, he was interrogated by a German officer who asked him his name, rank and service number. “Then he asked me what my religion was,” Supnik recalls. “I was surprised he asked that, but I told him—Hebrew. He sort of cocked one eye at me, like he didn’t understand. So I spelled it out for him . . . H-E-B-R-E-W, and that’s what he wrote down.”

A few weeks later, the Germans ordered that all Jewish prisoners step forward. They began reading from a list of soldiers who had admitted to being Jewish. But they didn’t call Ross’s name. “They understood *Jude*, Jew, but I guess this guy didn’t connect Hebrew,” Supnik says.

“That night I was lying in my bunk. The guys in my barracks knew I was Jewish, and I asked them if I should step forward. They told me to forget it, so I did.” No one ever pulled Ross out, and today he says he is satisfied he did the right thing. “I guess they got the number of guys they needed, and they never asked again,” he says.

Ed Cornell, Ross Supnik and others like them truly are Men of Honor. They did what they had to do to survive, and they came back alive so that one day the world might really know what happened to them and to the others who didn’t make it back. After almost sixty years of being forced to hold back this information, their heroic stories have found a voice—a small sampling of which is located within these pages.

We appreciate their sacrifice, and our country needs to thank them for what they did. Of course, these stories aren’t meant to be the final word. Ask five people to describe the same event and each will give you a different interpretation. These are the stories as the soldiers remember them, though not everyone could be included. Some Jewish soldiers had their own personal experiences outside of the concentration camps, and we mention them as we can. Most importantly, we pay tribute to all of the men and women who served during World War II and hope that their stories hold a place as testament to the truth and serve as lessons of perseverance and humility for all who read them.

POW: Stalag IV-B (Muhlberg); Auschwitz

We never went in. They just kept us there. There was something strange about the people. They were just standing there, watching us watching them. They had no hair and they looked like they had been starved to death.

—Marty Finkelstein, on his four hours at Auschwitz

It was shortly after midnight on June 6, 1944 as the C-47 bobbed and weaved along in the air currents above the North Atlantic. The steady buzz of airplane engines flew high above columns of ships bound for Normandy, though the invasion force was unseen below.

Inside the plane were eighteen men from the 82nd Airborne—young, tough, eager paratroopers who felt like they were ready for what awaited them on the ground. The unit had fought hard in Sicily, and then in Italy less than a year before. They anticipated another tough fight from the German units likely scattered around their drop zone at Saint Mère-Eglise.

Marty Finkelstein, a radioman for 3rd Platoon, sat across from the open door in second position. Across from him was the platoon leader, Lieutenant (Lt.) Phillip Stone. Marty thought hard about the jump ahead; he knew he would benefit now from some of the lessons the 82nd had learned at Sicily. They had long since ditched their gas masks—everyone knew the Germans weren't going to use gas this go-round. The men also had eliminated problems with their emergency parachutes. Despite the sense that he was ready, the nervous tension began to build for Marty as the minutes dragged on.

Marty exchanged glances with his friend, Stu Milligan, and another trooper, Mac McCormick. The three men had been together for some time

and they knew what was going through the other's mind. At that moment, Lt. Stone stood up.

The troops were awash in the roar and wind from the plane's huge propellers. The plane banked and skewed in the sky and Marty looked over the lieutenant's shoulder. Down below, he struggled to see the long white lines and fleeting images of ships sailing toward the coast. The night sky was cloudy and Marty thought he recognized the lines of wakes trailing out behind the vessels. And just ahead was the coastline of France and the 82nd Airborne's objective, the heavily fortified area of Saint Mère-Eglise.

The C-47 entered a cloud bank. Marty could feel the mist of the clouds drifting into the interior of the aircraft. Lieutenant Stone had hardly looked back at his men when the plane reentered the clearing. Marty was panicked—he could see the wing of a second C-47! The other plane had drifted over; the wing was just twenty feet from the door.

The pilot had to act fast. Trying to avoid a mid-air collision, the C-47 immediately began to dive. The aircraft shot straight down; all the men fell off their seats and rolled forward uncontrollably. On the floor was equipment and vomit; the men rolled all the way to the front of the aircraft and slammed into the bulkhead behind the pilot. Marty could think of only one thing—they were going to crash! Lieutenant Stone still sat by the door; he hung on to the end of his seat and the fuselage of the plane. Marty saw the pilot had cut on both the red and green jump lights during the dive, which signified the men were supposed to stand up, hook up, check equipment and jump. They wouldn't have stood a chance, Marty thought.

Finally, the pilot managed to level off the aircraft. The red and green lights stayed on, and Lt. Stone gave the signal to stand and head for the door. Marty looked back at the other troopers, struggling to untangle themselves from the pile of bodies. Lieutenant Stone knelt down to look out the door—he was trying to pinpoint the drop zone. He stood up and turned to Marty. "Go!" he shouted. He turned to jump, but Marty grabbed his harness. He realized the plane was flying at treetop level. Lieutenant Stone hesitated, but not long enough. He was the first out the door. The men of Marty's unit would never see Lt. Stone again.

Slowly they each jumped from the plane, out into the unknown darkness of trees and fields that lay below. Bad weather would force more than ninety percent of the airborne troops involved in the invasion to miss their

drop zones. Marty and the men from his platoon missed their target by more than twenty miles, instead landing in the fields outside Saint Lo.

Marty's parachute opened seconds before he touched the ground. He slammed into the grass with force, but he wasn't worried about the impact. The Nazis were lighting up the field with heavy fire. Marty landed alone in an asparagus field. The other men had landed on the other side of an adjacent hedgerow. Eleven of the eighteen men in Marty's group managed to reassemble on the other side of the field.

The unit fought ferociously. The first man killed was Sergeant (Sgt.) Monksguard; he was hit in the stomach. The men fought all through the first day and into the night. The German units threw everything they had at them, and Marty and his men returned fire over and over until their ammunition had all but dried up.

Stu Milligan was the first of Marty's friends to go down. About three hours after hitting the ground, he was knocked out by a concussion grenade. Marty and Mac McCormick kept him with them, but every time they tried to lift him he would just fall back to the ground, limp and incoherent. But the Germans kept firing.

The remaining eight men took stock of their ammunition. They had no more rounds, and some of their men were wounded. If they continued to fight, they would most certainly be destroyed. So they surrendered. The decision would haunt Marty for the rest of his life. "Because we landed where we did, we were fighting Germans by ourselves. There were about 200 of them and eight of us," Finkelstein says. "Eventually after fighting for eighteen hours, we were forced to give up."

With Marty, Mac and Stu lying in the grass, as many as 100 German soldiers made their way over to their position. They surrounded the paratroopers on all sides. They captured the men, then began to search them. Suddenly, a shot rang out. "One of the 'Gerries' fell and that's when they all hit the ground," Finkelstein recalls. "It had to be friendlies—it had to be one of our own." The soldiers knew other airborne troops were probably nearby shooting at the Germans, but they weren't able to get to them as they were surrounded on all sides. The Germans stood again. This time, one of the officers pulled out his Lugar handgun. He spoke in German, but Marty understood what he was saying. "Find the guys with the knives," the German officer told one of his men.

During the early morning hours of the jump, Marty and Stu had come face-to-face with two German officers. Stu made the choice to engage the officers and told Marty to come with him. A knife fight ensued and the two Germans were killed. The Nazis were now searching for the Americans who had done it.

Fortunately, Marty already had told the eight paratroopers in the attack to get rid of their trench knives. Marty and Mac had tossed their knives in a nearby ditch. That move may have saved their lives.

Several more shots were fired and the Germans crouched low in the grass. That's when a bullet fragment hit Marty in the leg. "It was no big deal," Finkelstein says. But it laid him out for a few minutes. The pain was shooting down through his kneecap where the bullet had careened off his leg. The Germans wasted no time. They gathered the eight American prisoners and marched them out of the field. Eighteen hours after the men jumped into the field and engaged the enemy, the eight survivors were prisoners—and they were on the move.

The first stop for the men was the town of Saint Lo. There, the Germans put Marty in a field hospital. The doctors were prepared to amputate his leg. "Really, it wasn't that bad. But we had some Russian prisoners that were being held in a nearby compound. We weren't supposed to, but we talked to them. They told us if somebody got a splinter in their finger, the Germans would cut off their hand. They didn't want the soldiers going back into the field to fight."

Marty quickly recovered from his wound, and he refused to allow the Germans to take the leg. With more and more prisoners being brought in, American, British and Russian alike, the Germans decided to move them across France, toward Germany. For forty days, the remaining men of Marty's platoon were loaded onto trucks and driven across country. If a truck could hold thirty men standing up, the Germans would put forty prisoners into it. They were shoved and beaten, and given nothing to eat or drink. They were taken from trucks and placed in train boxcars that would get bombed by Allied forces as they moved.

The American prisoners arrived at a transfer camp, and had been taken off the trucks, when a German officer began checking the dog tags of some of the men in the group. One or two of the men were pulled out away from the others. Then the officer got to Marty. Only then did he realize what

they were looking for—the letter “H” on his dog tags. Marty was a Jew. They pushed him out of line.

Marty can barely remember the days that followed. The Germans took him inside a large cobblestone building where the sounds of soldiers’ boots echoed across the floors. Along the walls were doors to small dark cells and Marty was placed in one of them. Later he was taken into an interrogator’s office. “I stood in front of a long mahogany table and saluted the officer sitting there,” Finkelstein says. “That’s when he said, ‘You’re a dirty Jew.’ That was it.” The German soldiers kicked and punched him so often he lost consciousness at least twice. He woke up at one point realizing that half his teeth were missing and that several others were lodged in the back of his throat. He tried to spit them out, but that only prompted the Germans to start kicking him again. One of the few things Marty remembers is waking up in a jail cell, which had a small window located at the top. He heard a voice calling to him—he realized the accented voice sounded like an Englishman.

“He told me, ‘I’ve been listening to what’s happening. They’re not going to hurt you,’” Finkelstein remembers the voice saying. Marty was somewhat amused by that—all his teeth were gone and he couldn’t feel his face. But that was the last major beating Marty would take. To this day, he wonders if the British troop hadn’t done something to help him.

Marty was moved to a large room with 200 other men. There was no space to lie down. One day a German soldier came and opened the door. He was looking for someone to peel potatoes, and Marty volunteered. At the end of a long building, Marty was shown to a wooden stool where he sat down in front of a bucket full of potatoes. He was given a dull knife, and he began to peel. He ate some of them, but the German guards didn’t seem to mind. After some time, a German civilian came and sat down beside Marty. “He spoke beautiful English,” Finkelstein recalls. “I didn’t know what he was up to. We talked about my parents owning a grocery store back in Philadelphia.” The man eventually left, and Marty didn’t think much about the incident until one day many months later.

One month after arriving at the transition camp, the soldiers were taken to their “final” destination—Stalag IV-B, Muhlberg, near the Polish-German border. All of the soldiers were placed in barracks after first arriving at Muhlberg. Stalag IV-B was run primarily by British prisoners and one day about four months after arriving in the camp, Marty was grabbed by a

group of them and taken into a building. He appeared before a “Kangaroo Court,” a group of angry soldiers who accused him of collaborating with the enemy.

Marty did not realize that his picture had been taken four months before as he sat peeling potatoes and speaking with the civilian. The photograph had been published along with a story inside a Dutch propaganda magazine. Marty was given a copy of the article. “I pleaded with them. I said, ‘Do what you will with me, but would you at least read the article?’” Finkelstein says.

The British prisoners went and got one of the soldiers who could speak Dutch. “All that the article said was that I was an American whose parents owned a grocery store in Philadelphia. Not everything was there, but it was enough,” Finkelstein says. The British soldiers realized they made a mistake and they let Marty go.

Despite his “acquittal,” Marty soon realized how his being Jewish was going to cause problems for him. One of the British soldiers, a sergeant major, was very vocal about his dislike for Jews and he frequently visited physical and verbal harassment on Marty. Finally, the anti-Semitic and anti-American comments pushed both Marty and Stu Milligan to their breaking points. One night while the sergeant major was sleeping, the two paratroopers crept in and beat the soldier with boards. Marty says he wasn’t sure if they killed him, but they never saw the sergeant major again.

Marty and Stu were locked in solitary confinement. The Germans placed the American soldiers in a tin building with a dirt floor. “They hadn’t opened the door in a couple days. We started digging a hole. We were able to get it about 12 to 14 inches, I guess. Then one of the guards opened the door, and that’s when all the shouting started,” Finkelstein says. They tried to escape, but were recaptured. The Germans decided to teach them a lesson. The two men were thrown into the back of a truck with their hands chained. The truck drove off through rugged terrain for what seemed like three days. Neither man was given food or water. Finally the truck stopped outside a menacing-looking camp that had a long pathway leading to the gate. The German driver went inside the camp for about an hour, then the guard went in.

From inside the truck, Marty and Stu watched the people move about inside the camp. “We never went in—they just kept us there. There was

something strange about the people. They were just standing there, watching us watching them. They looked like they had been starved to death,” Finkelstein says.

The camp was Auschwitz.

“I’m not sure why they took us there, but they turned around and took us right back to four-B [Stalag IV-B]. I didn’t realize what we saw or what was happening there until I got back [from the war],” Finkelstein says.

It was late April, heading into May 1945, when Marty, Mac and Stu made the decision to escape Stalag IV-B for the last time. They had been in the camp since September 1944. In addition to having lost a substantial amount of weight, the three men also dealt with the daily aggravation of lice. They had survived by trying to keep themselves occupied. They had dice, so they ran a craps game. At that time, cigarettes were money. A soldier’s cigarette would get him one dollar’s worth of stuff. “We were buying wedding rings for one cigarette and watches for five cigarettes,” Finkelstein says. Marty would save the tobacco from the leftovers so they could smoke after the games.

Marty, Mac and Stu had watched three Frenchmen routinely leave camp on a little cart drawn by a goat. “They probably were cooks for the German officers,” Finkelstein says. They would leave each day and travel out to the guards’ barracks outside the compound. The paratroopers decided that was their way out. One day they ambushed the Frenchmen and disguised themselves in their coats and hats. They managed to ride right out of camp and onto freedom. “We decided to head toward Paris,” Finkelstein says. There was more than twenty miles of unoccupied territory between the American and Russian lines, and Marty later learned the men had ridden right into the middle of it. “We ended up meeting three Jeeps from [the American] engineers,” Finkelstein says. “They had a hard time believing we were Americans because of our uniforms.”

Today, Marty reflects somberly on his experiences in the war.

“Jewish children are taught from early on not to make waves, and that’s sad,” Finkelstein says. “I didn’t know a thing about what they were doing to Jews. A lot of American Jews had thrown away their dog tags. I couldn’t think of doing that. But what I tell people now can be applied everywhere. There are no victories. In war, nobody wins.”

