

We Are Not Alone: A Story for Memorial Day

Earlier this week at the 3rd Annual conference of the Zionist Rabbinic Coalition, which I chair we heard from a number of policy experts and analysts of the dismal situation Israel is confronting in its current war against Hamas.

The IDF, Israel's Defense Forces is pursuing the war with amazing accuracy, acuity and precision. Despite the obstacles they have been extraordinarily effective and successful in finding and eliminating Hamas terrorists embedded in the civilian population they hide behind, and in the elaborate labyrinth of subterranean tunnels they built. Although they have taken measures no army has ever done to limit the casualties of non-combatants and so-called innocent Palestinians, and have achieved an incomparable and unprecedented low ratio not heard of in history, they are accused of the very crimes its enemy, Hamas commits regularly.

The speakers at our conference spoke of the organized, concerted, well-financed effort by Qatar, a country of 350,000 citizens to invest hundreds of billions of dollars in colleges across the country. And the money is not being spent just because they believe in the ideal of an enlightened citizenry and the principle of liberal arts education. With the release of hundreds of millions of dollars to Iran by the United States they have resources to supply their proxies – Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis to wage war against Israel. One speaker, our own Jonathan Schanzer described the 11 front war Israel is facing and fighting.

No wonder the American-Israeli comedian, Joel Chasnoff, who I invited to do the evening program to lighten things up after a heavy day opened with a great line. He said – “One rabbi after hearing the grim reports today optimistically said, ‘Well, at least it’s not as bad as 1938 and ’39!’”

While we came away with a feeling of the daunting and seemingly overwhelming challenges facing Israel and Jews around the world, there are pockets of hope and optimism. For as Jews, we always look for that message to counter despair.

For one, for the first time in 2,000 years, the Jewish people have an army, are an independent nation and can fight our enemies. Furthermore, the will and resolve of the Israeli people to prevail is strong. And the IDF is systematically achieving success in reducing Hamas' forces and fighting capacity.

There is one other factor to keep in mind. While the demonstrators are out in full force, and I encountered them on Thursday night when I went to the Israeli Embassy's celebration of Yom HaAtzmaut, we are not alone.

Our conference was addressed by Christian evangelicals - Minister Johnnie Moore and Black Baptist preacher Dumisani Washington who expressed their love and support of Israel and the Jewish people. And on Capitol Hill, a number of members of Congress – both Democrats and Republicans expressed their unwavering commitment to Israel's security.

And so, in that spirit, and on this Memorial Day weekend, I want to share with you a remarkable story, which you may or may not have heard, which shows the power of bravery and courage in the face of evil, and reminds us that even in the darkest moments, we are not alone.

First I want to tell you how the story came to light:

The family of Roddie Edmonds did not know much about what he did during World War II other than that he had been taken prisoner by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge and that he had survived 100 days of captivity before returning home. When his son, Chris Edmonds, would ask his father about the war, he usually would just tell him that some things were too difficult to talk about.

In 2009, about 24 years after Roddie had died, Chris' daughter, Lauren, decided to do her video history project about a family member, and chose to do it on her grandfather. When she googled "Master Sergeant Roddie Edmonds," a 2008 New York Times article about a New York City lawyer, Lester Tanner, the guy who had sold his Manhattan townhouse to former President Richard Nixon came up with her grandfather mentioned in the article. Tanner mentioned that Roddie Edmonds had saved his life and that of many other Jews during WWII.

That was when the family dug deeper and learned the story her grandfather had never told them.

In December of 1944, during what would become known as the Battle of the Bulge, Germany captured 20,000 American soldiers. Among them was group that was marched 50 kilometers to Germany and then loaded into box cars with no food or water for four days until they reached Bad Orb, Germany. There were 1,275 men in the group of noncommissioned officers held captive, and Roddie Edmonds was the highest-ranking NCO among them.

After arriving in the camp, the Germans announced that all Jewish prisoners in the group were to line up and report the following morning. By then, it was known that this was to separate and send the Jews to death or slave labor camps.

Master Sgt. Edmonds, who was 25 years old was responsible for all the POWs in the group. He issued the following order to his men. He told them that all of them, Jews and non-Jews were to fall out and line up together when the order was given the next day. That morning when the German officer in charge, Major Siegmann, gave the order for the Jews to come forward, all 1,275 prisoners of war in the unit lined up in front of the barracks. The Nazi officer summoned Edmonds, the commanding officer and said to him: "They cannot all be Jews."

Edmonds responded: "We are all Jews here."

The Nazi officer then pointed a pistol to Edmonds' head.

Edmonds refused to back down. He said, "According to the Geneva Convention, we only have to give our name, rank, and serial number. If you shoot me, you will have to shoot all of us, and after the war you will be tried for war crimes."

With this act of courage and defiance, Edmonds saved the lives of the 200 Jewish prisoners among the 1,275 American POWs. A few months later, on March 30, 1945, their camp, Stalag IXA was liberated by American forces. It was the second day of Passover.

Years later when the family met Tanner, he told them, "Master Sergeant Edmonds, at the risk of his immediate death, defied the Germans, and as a result with the unexpected consequence that the Jewish

prisoners were all saved.” Hank Freedman, another POW rescued by Edmonds, told Roddie’s son Chris that his father’s faith impacted and emboldened all his men, whether they were believers or not.

I first heard the story, and met his son, who became a Baptist minister in January of 2016, in a ceremony at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C., attended by President Barack Obama, where Master Sgt. Edmonds’ son accepted the Righteous medal award from Yad VaShem and the certificate of honor awarded to his father. Roddie Edmonds has twice been nominated for the Congressional Gold Medal. If you want to learn more about this incident, The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous’ has a short but powerful documentary on Edmonds, called, “[Following the Footsteps of My Father](#)”.

And so, even in these challenging times, when we feel isolated and alone, on the same week when the ICJ issued an absurd ruling and three European nations declared that they recognized Palestine, it is reassuring to know that there are good people, people of courage and of faith who are willing to stand with us. As the Psalmist proclaimed, “Although I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me.” Accompanied by God and men and women who know the difference between right and wrong, we will survive and good will prevail.

Memorial Day Weekend
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