

American Jews in Uniform: Stories of Valor and Resilience

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Jewish Americans have been part of the military since the Colonial Era, challenging stereotypes and fighting against **antisemitic** ideas. They have often enlisted at rates higher than their representation in the general population. Many have shown extraordinary courage, with at least 18 receiving the highest military honor, the Medal of Honor. Their service counters long-standing myths that labeled Jews as unfit or unwilling to serve. Their military contributions demonstrate how individuals can change societal perceptions through service and sacrifices, provide insight into the complex identities of those who served, and highlight how Jews have played a significant role in American history.

REVOLUTIONARY WAR

When the colonies sought freedom from the British monarchy, a small percentage of the American population was Jewish. Nevertheless, Jews played important roles in George Washington's Continental Army. Men like Solomon Bush and Mordecai Sheftall served as high-ranking officers at a time when prohibitions in European armies kept Jews at lower ranks.¹ Other Jewish men and women served on the homefront or worked in hospitals healing the wounded. Jewish financiers like Hyam Salomon worked to obtain loans for the cause and made personal loans to the new American leaders.

Jewish women made financial and supporting contributions. They led fundraising campaigns and supported the patriots' cause by sustaining morale and community at a time of hardships. Grace Seixas Nathan was a member of an influential patriotic family. Her brother, Gershom Mendes Seixas, was known as the "**Rabbi** of the Revolution." During the war, she documented her strong support for the Revolution and her commitment to the ideals of liberty in correspondence that remains a valuable historical record. Like many, she traveled from occupied New York to Philadelphia, a hub of Revolutionary activity, where she inspired others to contribute to the cause. In the South, women like Abigail Minis and Frances Hart Sheftall made similar contributions.

As an officer in the Continental Army and then as a diplomat, David Salisbury Franks overcame many challenges to contribute to his new country. The Philadelphia-born Franks lived in Montreal in 1776. He joined the Army following the Battle of Montreal, leading to a complex career. Franks served in the Northern Campaign and distinguished himself at the pivotal Battle of Saratoga. In recognition of his accomplishments he was promoted and given a new

¹ Derek J. Penslar, *Jews and the Military: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

assignment as an aide-de-camp to an important general. Unfortunately for Franks, his new direct superior officer turned out to be the most famous traitor in American history: Benedict Arnold.

When Arnold's treachery was revealed, Franks was implicated by association. Eager to continue serving, Franks asked General George Washington for a trial to clear his name. He wrote, "I requested to be indulged with a Court of Enquiry on my Conduct, not only to investigate what Knowledge or Share I might have had in the late General Arnold's Perfidy, but also to take in a retrospective View of my Conduct whilst serving in his Family at Philadelphia."²

Franks' efforts were successful. He was exonerated in a court martial and continued to serve as an Army officer. But he still faced suspicion, likely compounded by his sharing a name with his uncle, David Franks, a Loyalist and British contractor. His Jewish identity may have further intensified doubts about his loyalty. However, none of this stopped him from continuing to serve his country.

Franks later served as a diplomat, entrusted with carrying important dispatches to Europe. His diplomatic career may have been limited by personal characteristics that Thomas Jefferson noted. In a letter to James Madison, Jefferson wrote that Franks had "an understanding somewhat better than common but too little guard over his lips" and that "in the company of women . . . he loses all power over himself and becomes almost frenzied."³ Though Jefferson pointed out Franks' all-too-human flaws, his career shows that Jews were accepted in early American society, albeit with some suspicion. Franks died in Philadelphia in the yellow fever epidemic of 1793. Despite his flaws, he was remembered as a good soldier and devoted patriot.

THE CIVIL WAR

Thousands of Jews fought on both sides of the Civil War. The loyalties within Jewish communities reflected the diversity of thought across the rest of America. Jews often shared the political views of their neighbors, rather than following a unified Jewish perspective.⁴ Some were slaveholders; others were abolitionists. Some were deeply devoted to the causes of the day, and others remained unmotivated by ideological concerns around slavery. Jews contributed to both the Union and Confederate causes.⁵ Their varied experiences and choices during the war highlight both the complexity and individuality of Jewish identity in nineteenth-century America.

² To George Washington from Major David S. Franks, 16 October 1780," letter, October 16, 1780, Founders Online, National Archives and Records Administration. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-28-02-0192-0017>.

³ "From Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 14 February 1783," letter, February 14, 1783, Founders Online, National Archives and Records Administration. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-06-02-0225>.

⁴ Adam D. Mendelssohn, *Jewish Soldiers in the Civil War: The Union Army* (NYU Press, 2022).

⁵ To search for soldiers by name, visit "The Shapell Roster of Jewish Service in the American Civil War" at shapell.org/roster/.



Portrait photograph of Colonel Marcus M. Spiegel, 1863. National Museum of American Jewish Military History (P984.014.003).

For many Central European Jewish **immigrants**, the Civil War offered an economic opportunity: a steady paycheck. Marcus Spiegel, a Union officer from Ohio, enlisted for economic reasons, but developed abolitionist ideals. After initially supporting slavery, Spiegel came to oppose the institution, stating his “deep conviction” against it.⁶ Spiegel’s story illustrates how firsthand experiences in war shaped soldiers’ beliefs, making the ideals of freedom a personal commitment.

Jewish soldiers in the Civil War faced institutionalized as well as personal antisemitism. The most prominent example of institutional antisemitic discrimination was General Ulysses S. Grant’s General Orders No. 11, which expelled Jews from parts of the Union-occupied South.⁷ It claimed that Jews were, “as a class, violating every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department, and also Department orders, are hereby expelled from the Department.” The American Jewish community responded with outrage, and politicians from Grant to President Abraham Lincoln were bombarded with complaints from Jewish community members and active Jewish American soldiers.

In addition to actively fighting against the idea that Jews are dishonest in trade, as suggested by General Grant’s infamous order, Jewish Americans also challenged the belief that they could not serve effectively in the military. Many had successful military careers that proved these assumptions wrong. Leopold Karpeles was one of at least four Jewish recipients of the Medal of Honor during the Civil War, the nation’s highest military honor. His bravery in leading Union troops during the Wilderness Campaign served as a strong example of courage and valor.

WORLD WAR I

From the Civil War to World War I, the American Jewish population increased significantly. In 1860, about 150,000 Jews lived in the United States, and by 1920, that number grew to around 3.5 million. Just as they had done in all previous American armed conflicts, American Jews enlisted in large numbers. When the U.S. entered the war in 1917, approximately 225,000 Jewish men and women served in all branches of the military.

For the first time, women officially participated as uniformed members of the military. They worked in clerical jobs, drove trucks, and served as mechanics, radio operators, telephone operators, translators, and camouflage artists. Minnie Goldman and Hortense Levy, both Jewish women, served as “Hello Girls,” women who worked operating telephones near the front lines to provide important communications.

The Office of Jewish War Records was created to document the reality that Jews “did their bit” in the war. The first report was prepared immediately after the end of the war using data gathered by December 31, 1918. It listed the branches in which Jews served, awards and honors received, casualties, and other statistics.

⁶ Marcus M. Spiegel, *A Jewish Colonel in the Civil War: Marcus M. Spiegel of the Ohio Volunteers*, ed. Frank Loyola Byrne, Jean Powers Soman (University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 316.

⁷ Jonathan D. Sarna, *When General Grant Expelled the Jews* (Nextbook, 2012).

Though acknowledging incomplete data and the challenges of identifying who was Jewish, the report noted that Jews made up about three percent of the U.S. population but constituted four to five percent of the total military force.⁸ During the First World War, four Jewish Americans received the Medal of Honor.

Many American Jews in service were foreign-born. These Jewish immigrants experienced a shift in identity as the U.S. military provided a rapid Americanization process. Many had come to America fleeing persecution, including from **pogroms** in Eastern Europe. In the Russian Empire, Jews faced forced conscription (forced enrollment in a country's armed forces), were barred from advancing in rank or holding officer positions, and were often mistreated. Because military service was unequal and discriminatory, Jews frequently sought to avoid it. In the U.S., however, the call to serve was more often embraced, and even seen as a means to **acculturate** and earn respect in the American milieu.

Jews served alongside hundreds of thousands of foreign-born soldiers from 46 nations, many with limited English skills. The U.S. Army responded by creating the Camp Gordon Plan, which established a Foreign Soldiers Subsection that provided military instruction in the native languages of the recruits, including **Yiddish**, the language of Jewish Eastern Europe. The program was a success and instituted in Army camps across the country.⁹

Abraham Krotoshinsky came to America specifically to avoid military service under the repressive regime of the Russian Empire. He wrote, "As I look back at it now, it all seems strange. I ran away from Russia and came to America to escape military service. I hated Russia, its people, its government, in particular its cruel and inhuman treatment of Jews. Such a Government I refused to serve." In his new homeland, his attitude changed.¹⁰



A line of American telephone exchange operators seated at their stations in the Elysees Palace Hotel in Paris, France. National Archives and Records Administration (NAID: 86703177).



World War I soldier Benjamin Lichter. National Museum of American Jewish Military History.

⁸ American Jewish Committee, *The War Record of American Jews: First Report of the Office of War Records* (American Jewish Committee, 1919).

⁹ "Primary Sources - Camp Gordon Plan Part I," The United States World War I Centennial Commission, accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.worldwar1centennial.org/index.php?view=article&id=6092:primary-sources-camp-gordon-plan&catid=345:americans-all>.

¹⁰ Abraham Krotoshinsky, "How the Lost Battalion was Saved: A Jewish Hero Relives The Argonne," *The Jewish Veteran*, April 1937, 5.

Krotoshinsky enlisted in the U.S. Army and joined the 77th Division, known as the “Melting Pot” division; around 25 percent of its members were Jewish.¹¹ In the Argonne Forest, he volunteered to break through German lines and succeeded in delivering a critical message to headquarters, earning him the Distinguished Service Cross, the military’s second-highest honor.¹² Krotoshinsky’s story illustrates how immigrants embraced their new identity and contributed to their adopted country.

WORLD WAR II

World War II marked the most significant chapter in American Jewish military service, both in the unprecedented number of Jews who served and in the deeply personal stake they had in the conflict. Just as in other conflicts, Jewish women served in many capacities.¹³ The Army and Navy Nurse Corps expanded, offering the closest opportunity for women to access combat zones. Each branch of the military established women’s units.

Frances Slanger, a native of Łódź, Poland, immigrated to the United States as a child and grew up in Roxbury, Massachusetts. She was one of the first four military nurses to land in Normandy after D-Day. On October 21, 1944, she penned a heartfelt letter to *Stars and Stripes*, the American military newspaper, and reflected on the sacrifices of soldiers and the work of nurses in the European Theater. In her letter, she expressed profound admiration for the resilience and courage of the GIs, and expressed the necessity of the work of the field hospitals. She compared the work of the overseas nurses to keeping alive a burning fire, writing:

[W]ith the slow feeding of wood and finally coal, a roaring fire is started . . . how similar to a human being a fire is. If it is not allowed to run down too low, and if there is a spark of life left in it, it can be nursed back. So can a human being. It is slow. It is gradual. It is done all the time in these field hospitals and other hospitals at the ETO.¹⁴

Tragically, the same day her letter was published, Slanger was killed in a German artillery attack.¹⁵

As in World War I, an organization was established to document the contributions of Jewish women and men in service for public recognition and historical record. The Bureau of War Records of the National Jewish Welfare Board estimated that 550,000 Jewish Americans served across all branches of the U.S. armed forces.¹⁶ Jews in service held various roles, and fought in the Pacific and across Europe. The war in Europe held special resonance for American Jews. For many Jews, fighting in Europe was deeply personal; it meant taking a stand against the persecution being carried out by the Nazis. Often Jewish American servicemembers had personal connections with those being oppressed by and even murdered at the hands of the occupying Nazi forces.

¹¹ *The War Record of American Jews*.

¹² “Abraham Krotoshinsky,” Hall of Valor, *Military Times*, <https://valor.militarytimes.com/hero/13001/>.

¹³ To learn more about women’s participation in World War II, visit this helpful resource from the National World War II Museum: nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-women-world-war-ii.

¹⁴ For more information about Slanger and her letter to *Stars and Stripes*, see nmajmh.org/education/individual-profiles/frances-slanger/.

¹⁵ Bob Welch, *American Nightingale: The Story of Frances Slanger, Forgotten Heroine of Normandy* (Atria Books, 2005).

¹⁶ Isadore Kaufman, *American Jews in World War II, Volume One* (The Dial Press, 1947).

Again, Jewish immigrants played an important role in the war. Some recent immigrants had escaped the Nazis and later returned to Europe as American service members. Some were “Ritchie Boys” who trained at the Military Intelligence Training Center at Camp Ritchie, Maryland, where they used their language skills and knowledge of Europe to gather intelligence and interrogate Prisoners of War (POWs).¹⁷ Returning to Europe as Americans, some Ritchie Boys found themselves in the jarring position of interrogating their former friends and neighbors.

(MILITARY INTELLIGENCE TRAINING CENTER, CAMP RITCHIE, MARYLAND)
INTERROGATOR'S OUTLINE

IMPORTANT:
This questionnaire is neither complete nor rigid. It is to be considered a sample illustration. Interrogators will be expected to revise it to fit a given situation and to supplement it with questions designed to obtain other information required by the unit intelligence officer. The order can be changed to suit the circumstances and in particular to fit the leads and trends of thought developed in the PW's testimony. The general topics of the questions should be committed to memory as soon as possible and the outline regarded as a guide or check list.

The questions below assume, for purposes of illustration, that the PW belongs to a regular infantry outfit.

1. CIRCUMSTANCES OF CAPTURE AND IDENTIFICATION OF UNIT. (Use Map!)

Wie wurden Sie gefangen genommen? (Address PW by name and rank if possible)
How were you captured?
Wo, wann, mit wie vielen anderen?
When, where and with how many others?
Für Truppenteil? (From PW to left or separate in)
What is your outfit?
Ihre Feldpostnummer?
What is your Field Post Number (APO)?
Wie heißen Sie? (If not previously known)
What is your name?
Dienstgrad? (If not previously known)
What is your grade (rank)?
Persönlicher Auftrag und Tätigkeit?
What was your personal mission and activity?
Aufgabe der Einheit? Absichten?
What was the assignment of your outfit and its mission?
- 2. LOCATIONS AND LOCATIONS (Use Map)

Wo liegt jetzt Ihre Gruppe, Zug, Kp.? (Terminology to be varied by interrogator according to PW branch of service)
Where is your section, platoon, company now?
Wo liegt der Gefechtsstand Ihrer Kp., Btl., Regt.?
Where is the Command Post of your company, battalion, regiment?
Wo ist der Beobachtungspost (OP) Ihrer Kp., Btl., Regt.?
Where is the Observation Post (OP) of your company, battalion, regiment?
Welcher Truppenteil liegt rechts von Ihnen, links und hinter Ihnen?
What outfits are in front, right, left, and rear of yours?
Wo sindStellungen? (M.G., Gren., I.C., Panz., Pz., Art.)
Where are thepositions? (M.G. mortar, Inf. guns, AT, AA, Art.)
Wo sindPanzer, Selbstfahrlafetten?
Where are the Tanks, Assault guns, self-propelled artillery?
Wo sind Stützpunkte? (Wie für Artillerie?) Wo sind diese Stützpunkte? How mined?
vermint? (bunker, sonstige Befestigungen) Where are the strongpoints (for which weapons?) bunkers & other fortifications?

Left: Sample questionnaire from Camp Ritchie for interrogation of German prisoners. Leon Mendel Collection, National Museum of American Jewish Military History (A988.313.006).



Right: An American soldier and a Holocaust survivor, Eli Heimberg Collection, National Museum of American Jewish Military History (P993.087.125).

When the U.S. Army began liberating Nazi concentration camps in the spring of 1945, Jewish soldiers played a particularly important role. They aided survivors and bore witness to atrocities. These acts underscored the unique stakes for Jewish American soldiers: they were fighting for their country, their heritage, and the survival of their people. Some spoke Yiddish and could communicate with survivors in the camps. Variations on the phrase “Ich bin an Amerikaner Yid” appear in the accounts of many Jewish liberators identifying themselves as an American and offering Jewish community where the Nazis had tried to destroy it.

¹⁷ Beverly Eddy, *Ritchie Boy Secrets: How a Force of Immigrants and Refugees Helped Win World War II* (Stackpole Books, 2021).

Morris Eisenstein served with the 42nd Infantry Division at the liberation of Dachau. He described his encounter with a young survivor in the camp:

. . . I saw that little Jewish fellow in a corner, weeping and wailing. And the idea was you go over and try to get him straightened out which I think I did.

I told him ‘Ich bin American Yid,’ so he looked around, he was amazed . . . Then he started weeping . . . I didn’t know what to do . . . We had had a firefight with some SS two days before. I had a pile of money in my pocket, about 15-20,000 dollars in a big wad, big enough to choke a horse. I pulled it out, and I put it in the pocket of his jacket. He said in Yiddish, ‘I can’t take this, it’s not proper. I have nothing to give you in exchange.’ I was so overwhelmed, I almost cried right then and there. And then I saw the badge on his uniform. You know . . . the tin with the name “Jude” on it. That’s one of the best deals I ever made. \$15,000 for a piece of tin. It was, of course, financially no deal. But morally and emotionally it was the best deal I ever made in my life.¹⁸

Eisenstein received two Silver Stars and three Bronze Stars for his service in World War II. His experience at Dachau deeply impacted his life, leading him to devote himself to philanthropic causes.

Though the Jewish contribution to the war helped many Jews to become accepted as “full Americans,” the fight against antisemitism was far from over both within the military and in larger American culture.

KOREAN WAR

Just five years after the end of World War II, Americans were once again called to serve—this time in the Korean War. For some Jewish refugees who had survived concentration camps as children or teenagers and resettled in the U.S., this conflict became their first opportunity to serve their new country in uniform. Hungarian-born Tibor Rubin lost much of his family in the Holocaust. He was imprisoned at Mauthausen concentration camp when it was liberated on May 5, 1945. Inspired by the American soldiers he saw that day, he swore he would come to the U.S. and “become a G.I. Joe.”¹⁹

Rubin joined the U.S. Army in 1950. Despite his exceptional service, he faced persistent discrimination from his antisemitic first sergeant. This sergeant withheld recommendations for Rubin’s commendations, deliberately preventing him from receiving recognition for his bravery during and after combat. Even in the face of this injustice, Rubin’s dedication to courageous service remained unwavering. When his unit was ordered to retreat under heavy attack, Rubin remained behind to hold a strategic hill, delaying the enemy for 24 hours. After being captured, he drew on his experience as a Holocaust survivor to help fellow prisoners endure the hardships of the POW camp—quietly sharing what little he had, caring for the sick, and offering support where he could.

¹⁸ *GIs Remember: Liberating the Concentration Camps* (National Museum of American Jewish Military History, 1994).

¹⁹ Tibor Rubin Collection, oral history, Veterans History Project, Library of Congress (AFC/2001/001/89865).
<https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.89865/>.

Rubin's personal experiences with discrimination highlight the challenges that Jewish service members sometimes faced within the military, even as they fought for their country and the values it represented. His Medal of Honor, awarded in 2005 by President George W. Bush, recognized his valor and sacrifice. Rubin's story reflects themes of courage, perseverance, and facing discrimination. His actions, despite the prejudice he encountered, reflect quiet moral strength and the need to remember and address past injustices.²⁰

CONCLUSION

Jews have continued to serve in the U.S. military through the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and into the present day. In 2021, Christopher Celiz became the only Jewish servicemember posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor in the War on Terror, for his heroism in Afghanistan.²¹

The history of Jewish participation in the American military highlights the nuanced relationship between identity, patriotism, and belonging. It is a powerful reflection of the vital roles that immigrants and members of minoritized communities have played in shaping the nation. Their service and sacrifice are a reminder that American strength and values are upheld by people of all backgrounds, including Jewish Americans who have stood alongside their fellow citizens in defense of the country.

²⁰ Daniel Cohen, *Single Handed: The Inspiring True Story of Tibor "Teddy" Rubin—Holocaust Survivor, Korean War Hero, and Medal of Honor Recipient* (Dutton Caliber, 2016).

²¹ "Christopher Andrew Celiz," Congressional Medal of Honor Society, accessed May 12, 2025.
www.cmoHS.org/recipients/christopher-a-celiz.