

Three Jewish Military Heroes
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My dear friends,

This morning we honor all our veterans here with us today. We also pay tribute to three Jewish military veterans by relating their stories and recounting their heroism. I have selected them as examples of the finest traditions of the military.

Corporal Tibor Rubin received the Medal of Honor for his extraordinary heroism between 1950 and 1953 while serving as a rifleman with the First Cavalry Division of the U. S Army in the Korean conflict.

While his unit was retreating to the Pusan Perimeter in the fall of 1950, Rubin was assigned to stay behind to keep open a vital road link used by his withdrawing unit. During the ensuing battle, overwhelming numbers of North Korean troops assaulted a hill that was defended solely by Rubin. He inflicted a staggering number of casualties on the attacking force during his personal 24-hour battle. He single-handedly slowed the enemy advance and allowed his regiment to complete its withdrawal successfully.

Following the breakout from the Pusan Perimeter, Rubin's regiment proceeded northward and advanced into North Korea. During the advance, Rubin helped capture several hundred North Korean soldiers.

On October 30, 1950, Chinese forces attacked his unit at Unsan, North Korea, during a massive nighttime assault. That night and throughout the next day, Rubin manned a machine gun at the south end of the unit's line after three previous gunners became casualties. He continued to man his machine gun until his ammunition was exhausted. His determined stand slowed the pace of the enemy advance in his sector, permitting the remnants of his unit to retreat southward.

As the battle raged, Rubin was severely wounded. Chinese forces captured him in his wounded condition. After they imprisoned him they offered more than once to return him to freedom, but he refused, choosing instead to stay in the prison camp with the other prisoners in order to help them. Rubin repeatedly disregarded his own personal safety in the weeks and months that followed. Immediately after his capture and for the rest of his time in the camp, he snuck out of the camp at night in search of food for his comrades. Breaking

into enemy food storehouses and gardens, he risked certain torture or death if caught.

Rubin provided not only food to the starving soldiers, but also desperately needed medical care and moral support for the sick and wounded of the POW camp. His brave, selfless efforts directly contributed to saving the lives of as many as forty of his fellow prisoners.

Our second Jewish war hero and Medal of Honor recipient is John Lee Levitow, Airman First Class in the U.S. Air Force.

In 1969 Levitow was fighting in Vietnam. He was assigned as a loadmaster aboard an AC-47 aircraft flying a night mission in support of Long Binh Army post. He distinguished himself by exceptional heroism when a hostile mortar round struck his aircraft.

The resulting explosion blew a hole two feet in diameter through the wing. Fragments from the explosion ripped more than 3,500 holes in the fuselage. All occupants of the cargo compartment were wounded and helplessly slammed against the floor and fuselage.

Just before the mortar round struck the aircraft, a crew member had been launching flares out the open cargo compartment door to provide illumination for Army ground troops engaged in combat below. The crew member was holding an activated flare preparing to throw it out the door when the mortar round struck. The explosion tore the activated flare from his grasp.

The blast of the mortar round stunned Levitow. He suffered more than 40 fragment wounds in his back and legs. Despite his wounds, he staggered to his feet and turned to assist the man nearest to him who had been knocked down and was bleeding heavily. As he was moving his wounded comrade forward and away from the open cargo compartment door, he saw the smoking flare ahead of him in the aisle.

Realizing the danger involved and completely disregarding his own wounds, Levitow started toward the burning flare. The aircraft was partially out of control. The flare was rolling wildly from side to side. Levitow struggled forward despite the loss of blood from his many wounds and the partial loss of feeling in his right leg.

Unable to grasp the rolling flare with his hands, he threw himself bodily upon the burning flare. Hugging the deadly device to his body, he dragged himself back to the rear of the aircraft and hurled the flare through the open cargo door. At that instant the flare separated and ignited in the air, but clear of the aircraft.

By his selfless and heroic actions, Levitow saved the aircraft and its entire crew from certain death and destruction.

These two men and countless others provide inspiring examples of heroism. To find examples of similarly heroic female soldiers, we must look to the fighting forces of other countries. Women have not been permitted to assume combat roles in the United States armed services. That limitation is in process of being changed, but the change has not yet taken effect.

The female Jewish war hero who comes immediately to mind is Hannah Senesh. She was born in Hungary in 1921. As a teenager she attended a Protestant private school in Hungary. There she experienced anti-Semitic discrimination. Although the school was a Protestant school, it accepted Catholic and Jewish pupils as well, but the school made the Jewish families pay two or three times the amount Catholics paid.

Senesh and her family deeply resented this anti-Semitic treatment. She also realized that the situation of the Jews in Hungary was becoming precarious. As a result Senesh became a Zionist. She joined Maccabea, a Hungarian Zionist student organization.

Senesh graduated from the school in 1939. She decided to emigrate to what was then the British Mandate for Palestine and made her way there just before the onset of World War Two. She enrolled in an agricultural school, then joined the Haganah in 1941, at the age of 20. The Haganah was the paramilitary group that laid the foundation for the IDF.

In 1943 Senesh enlisted in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force of the British Army as an Aircraftwoman 2nd Class. She began her training in Egypt as a paratrooper for a British military unit called the Special Operations Executive or SOE.

On March 14, 1944, Senesh parachuted into Yugoslavia with two other British soldiers. Their mission was to make their way to Hungary to assist in fighting the Germans. They joined a partisan group. Soon after landing, however, they learned the Germans had already occupied Hungary. The two men with Senesh wanted to call off the mission as too dangerous. Senesh disagreed, however, and persuaded them to press on with her to the Hungarian border. At the border, however, Hungarian gendarmes arrested them.

The gendarmes found her British military transmitter, used to communicate with the SOE and other partisans. They took Senesh to a prison, stripped her, tied her to a chair, then whipped and clubbed her for three days. She lost several teeth as a result of the beating.

The men who had captured Senesh demanded that she tell them the code for her transmitter so they could find out who the parachutists were and misdirect others. Senesh refused to tell them.

They transferred Senesh to to a Budapest prison where they repeatedly interrogated and cruelly tortured her. She would not provide any information to her captors except her name. She refused to tell them the transmitter code, even

when her mother was also arrested. The authorities threatened to kill her mother if she did not cooperate, but Senesh held firm and her mother was not killed.

While in prison, Senesh used a mirror to flash signals out the window to prisoners in other cells. She also communicated using large cut-out letters that she placed in her cell window one at a time and by drawing the Star of David in the dust. She tried to rally the others by singing. Throughout this ordeal, Senesh kept her spirit high and stayed true to her mission.

In October, 1944, Senesh was tried and convicted on a charge of treason. A German firing squad executed her on November 7, 1944.

In 1950 the remains of Hannah Senesh were brought to Israel and buried in the military cemetery on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem.

Senesh was both a poet and a playwright, writing both in Hungarian and Hebrew. The last poem she wrote, while awaiting execution, was "Ashrei Hagaf-rur."

Ash-rei ha-gaf-rur she-nis-raf ve-hi-tzit le-ha-vot.

Ash-rei ha-le-ha-vah she-ba-a-rah ve-sit-rei le-va-vot.

Ash-rei ha-le-va-vot she-yad-u la-cha-dol be-cha-vod.

Ash-rei ha-gaf-rur she-nis-raf ve-hi-tzit le-ha-vot.

Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.

Blessed is the flame that burns in the secret fastness of the heart.

Blessed is the heart with strength to stop its beating for the sake of honor.

Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.

The best known of her poems is Halikha LeKesariya ("A Walk to Caesarea"), commonly known as Eli, Eli ("My God, My God").

Eli, Eli

Shelo yigamer le'olam

Hachol vehayam

Rishrush shel hamayim

Berak hashamayim

Tefilat ha'adam.

My God, My God, I pray that these things never end,
The sand and the sea,
The rush of the waters,
Lightning of the heavens,
The prayer of mankind.

No words can express adequately our gratitude to heroes like Tibor Rubin and John Lee Levitow and Hannah Senesh and to all the men and women of the armed services. To those veterans here this morning, and to all our brave men and women in uniform, we can say only, "Thank you for your service."