After more than 75 years, Jewish World War II service members killed in action and buried under crosses are getting proper headstones

Doree Lewak Apr 26, 2022, 11:36 AM

Major Davidson salutes the new headstone of Private Allan Chase Franken in Manila, Philippines, in February of 2020. Courtesy of Operation Benjamin

Everett Moses Seixas, Jr. was an only child from New York City who went on to earn two Ivy League degrees before enlisting in WWII in 1943 at age 21. He was killed in action during the Battle of the Bulge in 1944 and later buried in the Luxembourg American Cemetery under a Latin cross.

But Seixas was actually Jewish. Now, the nonprofit group Operation Benjamin is fighting to ensure a proper headstone for those Jewish servicemen like Seixas who died during the war and were buried beneath the wrong religious iconography.

This week, the group is traveling with a handful of Gold Star families to four cemeteries in France and Belgium to honor seven WWII servicemen with corrected Star of David grave markers. For Peter Seixas, who was born three years after his cousin's death, he and his family are grateful to right this decades-old wrong.

"Religious markers on the gravestones is of course a deep tradition. The fact that Everett has a marker that's a cross is clearly a mistake, given the history and legacy of the Seixas family," he told Insider, noting the family's roots in Touro, the first synagogue in the US, in the 1700s. "I'm happy that it's corrected so that a Jewish contribution and Jewish role in this allied e ort will be recognized."

Since its founding in 2019, Operation Benjamin has presided over 18 ceremonies in military cemeteries in Europe and throughout the world.

"It's really love — for the love and appreciation for what these guys did," said CEO Shalom Lamm, expressing the importance of these ceremonies. "We're honoring these brave soldiers who gave their lives in defense of freedom. It's our obligation to the dead."

Everett M. Seixas Jr. was killed during the Battle of the Bulge in 1944 and buried in a military cemetery under the wrong religious symbol. Courtesy of Operation Benjamin

Three headstones will be changed at the Lorraine American Cemetery in St. Avold, France, this week, one belonging to Major Maxwell Papurt.

"This guy is straight out of Hollywood — an amazing story," said Lamm, who told Insider that he was contacted by the wife of the cemetery s superintendent after ambling through the grounds during a morning walk when she discovered something that felt amiss about the grave marker. "She believed he was Jewish," said Lamm.

After careful research, the group made a determination about the lineage of Papurt, who in 1944 was stationed in Luxembourg City, when he was injured and taken prisoner along with three other soldiers. While in captivity by the Germans, he never revealed his Jewish identity and was ultimately killed in an Allied raid on November 29, 1944.

"We will be changing the headstone on this trip," Lamm said, noting the family's sense of "relief."

Operation Benjamin ceremony erecting a new Star of David headstone in Manila, Philippines, February 2020. Courtesy of Operation Benjamin.

While Lamm is unsure exactly how many servicemen and women are buried under mistaken religious iconography, his team, along with the American Battle Monuments Commission, are leaving no stone unturned. He recalled the poignant remarks of 99-year-old Harry Cordova, the younger brother of fallen serviceman Sam Cordova, a Purple Heart recipient who was buried in the Philippines under a Latin cross instead of a Star of David. A ceremony in December 2020 took place 79 years later to the day that Sam was killed.

Being buried under the wrong religious symbol was inadvertent and sometimes unavoidable.

While Seixas' identification tag may have included a "P" (for "Protestant"), Jewish soldiers were sometimes known to mask their faith before deploying to Europe. Though a regrettable oversight, the War Department had no indication that Seixas was Jewish.

Lamm said some sergeants would even warn their men to scrub the "H" (for Hebrew") from their dog tags — and replace it with a "P" or "C" for "Christian" — lest they get captured in Nazi Germany. According to the National WWII Museum in New Orleans, some Jewish pilots would even throw their tags away if they were shot down while others kept theirs, wanting the Nazis to know they were fighting back.

Added Lamm: "They were right: Jews who were captured in battle were often separated from other GIs," he said, adding that over 100 of them were killed in the Buchenwald concentration camp. (It's believed over 60,000 Jewish servicemen became prisoners of war during WWII from American, British, and French forces, though they were largely a orded their rights under the Geneva Convention, according to research published in Sage Journal.)

While Peter Seixas told Insider he won't be able to travel to Europe for the ceremony, another relative will be on hand. After all this time, the family feels great gratitude for the proper burial. "It's excellent this is being corrected," he said.