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My dad never came back to Kansas City from war. He finally has the marker he deserves

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Many Jewish soldiers who gave their life for the United States were buried with grave markers bearing the Christian cross. The nonprofit Operation Benjamin replaces them with the Star of David. *Operation Benjamin*

When I was 3, my father Albert Belmont was killed in World War II.

I thought growing up without him was the only tragedy. I was wrong.

Born Abraham Belkowitz to Russian Jewish immigrants, his family changed their name to Belmont in the 1930s as a wave of antisemitism swept across Europe.

Despite the personal risk, my father and his brothers believed in the mission to defeat Adolf Hitler — and their letters to each other expressed their passion.

After he enlisted, my mother ran his downtown Kansas City photography studio while I waited in vain for him to return. He was killed in action on Nov. 30, 1944. After the war ended, we moved to St. Louis. It was traumatic to leave behind my friends and memories of my dear father.

Returning soldiers — many missing limbs — were all over St. Louis. Among them were my mother's brothers. Once I saw them, I realized my father was never coming home.

In 1947, my mother remarried a veteran named Herman Strifling. I was thrilled to get a new father. My sister Brucine was not.

Our name changed to Strifling, and we were raised to be well-behaved girls who followed our stepfather's rules. Our mother warned us not to mention Albert Belmont.

I grew up knowing little about my father, his family or his 32 years on Earth. I would pretend my "real father" was alive (something I had seen in a movie). When I was 13, Brucine showed me a hidden photo of him.

In 1959, as my maternal grandmother was dying, she talked honestly about my father, telling us that he was a good and charitable man, and promised to tell us more. However, she died weeks later and so did my ability to learn further.

I attended college, married and had children. Brucine shared memories of Dad, his family and the day we learned he was killed.

As a working, divorced mother of two, I regretfully had little time to look for the Belmonts. Then one day in 1995, I arrived home to a ringing telephone. A voice said, "Barbara, I am your cousin Ellen — our fathers were brothers." I could barely breathe.

That call led to tearful gatherings of cousins, uncles and aunts for years. I treasure my friendships with the Belmonts and have boxes of photographs and a lifetime of family history.

But even with my newfound family, something was still off. A common practice for Jewish soldiers during World War II was to hide their religious identities for fear of retribution. So my dad's dog tags had the letter P (for Protestant) hammered into the corner.

When he was killed, my father was buried under a Christian cross at France's Lorraine American Cemetery. Despite our regret, we never did anything about it, even after I visited his grave in 1992.

A while back, I was contacted by a wonderful nonprofit called [Operation Benjamin](#), which works to replace grave markers of soldiers like my father's with Stars of David.

My father was a proud and loyal Jewish American who could not stand by and watch Hitler roll through Europe. He was so firm in his opposition that he gave his life for it — at an immeasurable cost to our family.

Last month, I traveled to France along with six other Gold Star families to watch as workers from the American Battle Monuments Commission slowly and deliberately removed the cross and replaced it with a headstone in the shape of the Star of David — with my father's name and personal information etched into it.

It was a very emotional ceremony, but finally I have some peace. I was able to reconnect with the religion to which I never felt attached and the father I never knew, whose sacred memory I can now properly honor.

On this Memorial Day, with the world again under siege from tyranny, we honor the brave men and women who — like my father did nearly eight decades ago — gave up everything in the defense of freedom.

Thank you, Dad. I hope you can now rest in peace.