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WWII vet posthumously honored for saving Jews

Captured soldier stood up to Nazis in German camp

BY ARON HELLER
Associated Press

JERUSALEM — The Nazi soldiers made their orders very clear: Jewish American prisoners of war were to be separated from their fellow brothers in arms and sent to an uncertain fate.

But Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds, who wasn't Jewish, would have none of that. As the highest-ranking noncommissioned officer held in the German POW camp, he ordered more than 1,000 American captives to step forward with him and brazenly pronounced: "We are all Jews here."

Accounts to accounts, he would not waver, even with a pistol to his head, and his captors eventually backed down.

Seventy years later, the Knoxville, Tenn., native is being posthumously recognized with Israel's highest honor for non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during World War II.

He's the first American serviceman to receive the honor.

"Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds seemed like an ordinary American soldier, but he had an extraordinary sense of responsibility and dedication to his fellow human beings," said Avner Shalev, chairman of the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum and memorial. "The choices and actions of Master Sgt. Edmonds set an example for his fellow American soldiers as they stood united against the barbaric evil of the Nazis."

It's a story that remained untold for decades and one that his son, the Rev. Chris Edmonds, discovered long after his father's death in 1985.

Edmonds was captured



YAD VASHEM

U.S. Army Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds is being recognized as "Righteous Among the Nations."

with thousands of others in the Battle of the Bulge in late 1944 and spent 100 days in captivity. His son vaguely knew about his father's past from a pair of diaries Edmonds kept in captivity.

But it was only while scouring the Internet a few years ago that he began to unravel the true drama that had unfolded — oddly enough, when he read a newspaper article about Richard Nixon's post-presidency search for a New York home. Nixon purchased his upper East Side town house from Lester Tanner, a prominent New York lawyer who mentioned in passing how Edmonds had saved him and dozens of other Jews during the war.

That sparked a search for Tanner, who along with another Jewish POW, Paul Stern, told the younger Edmonds what they witnessed on Jan. 27, 1945, at the Stalag IXA POW camp near Ziegenhain, Germany.

The German armed forces segregated Jewish POWs from non-Jews. On the eastern front, captured Jewish soldiers in the Russian army had been sent to extermination camps.

At the time of Edmonds' capture, the most infamous Nazi death camps were no longer fully operational, so

Jewish American POWs were sent to slave labor camps. U.S. soldiers had been warned that Jewish fighters among them would be in danger if captured and were told to destroy any evidence identifying them as Jewish.

So when the German camp commander, speaking in English, ordered the Jews to identify themselves, Edmonds knew what was at stake.

Turning to the rest of the POWs, he said: "We are not doing that, we are all falling out," recalled Chris Edmonds, his son, who is in Israel participating in a seminar for Christian leaders.

"And then my dad said: 'If you are going to shoot, you are going to have to shoot all of us because we know who you are and you'll be tried for war crimes when we win this war,'" Edmonds said. Witnesses to the exchange said the German officer then withdrew.

About 6 million European Jews were killed by German Nazis and their collaborators during World War II. The names of those honored for risking their lives to protect Jews are engraved along an avenue of trees at the Jerusalem memorial.

More than 26,000 have been designated "Righteous Among the Nations," the most famous being Oskar Schindler, whose efforts to save more than 1,000 Jews were documented in Steven Spielberg's 1993 film "Schindler's List," and Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat who is credited for having saved at least 20,000 Jews before mysteriously disappearing.

A ceremony for Edmonds is planned next year. And, thanks to his son's efforts, Edmonds is now also being considered for the a Medal of Honor.

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