

Chanukkah Celebrations-Vietnam, 1965
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A total of 10 Chanukkah services were held in the Marine enclaves of Da Nang, Chu Lai, and Phu Bai. During each of the eight nights of Chanukkah, the candles were kindled and services were conducted either by the Jewish Chaplain or a lay leader. Total attendance was slightly over 80 servicemen, most of whom were Marines. A small number of Army, Air Force, and Navy personnel attended. Though the attendance was small numerically, it represented 30-40% of the potential congregation. Over 30 persons were in attendance on the first night of Chanukkah celebration in the Da Nang enclave which equalled the attendance of any of the High Holy Days. It was surprising since Chanukkah traditionally is considered a minor festival. After the religious service and the lighting of the Chanukkah candles in the chapel, a Chanukkah party was held in each enclave. The messhall and chapel were gayly decorated with homemade Chanukkah decorations. Chanukkah songs were sung, Chanukkah gifts were distributed, and refreshments were served. A social and fellowship hour followed.

Several factors contributed to the increased attendance and participation at our Chanukkah celebrations. First, under combat conditions and separated from the secularization of such religious holidays as Chanukkah and Christmas, the men focus more clearly upon the central messages. Secondly, since these holidays are traditionally celebrated within the family, loneliness is inevitable, leading men to identify more closely with the ceremonials representative of family and community. This is especially true for the Jewish serviceman whose pangs of loneliness are intensified because he is frequently the only Jewish lad in his unit. Battalion size units of approximately 1000 Marines often include only five to ten Jewish men. They search for fellowship and anticipate meeting with other Jewish men at religious services. Thirdly, the men are frequently deployed in the field and are unable to attend the weekly Sabbath or week day services held in each enclave. Hence, all Jewish holidays, including minor festivals such as Chanukkah and Purim, become particularly meaningful.

The Chanukkah celebration in Vietnam was enhanced by two unexpected events. First, the celebration included special guests: The Honorable Mr. Joseph Resnick, and the captain and crew of the Israeli freighter, Har Carmel. The ship was anchored in the Da Nang Harbor. The presence of the Jewish Congressman was publicized in the schedule of the Chanukkah services distributed by the III Marine Amphibious Force to all units. The Jewish Chaplain also sent a letter and personal invitation to each Jewish serviceman to join in the Chanukkah celebration.

Secondly, under combat conditions, it is unusual to be able to serve Jewish delicacies. Yet the men were especially delighted when latkes (potato pancakes) were served. Excellent co-operation was rendered by the mess sergeants in the preparation of special foods for both the festival of Chanukkah and the High Holy Days. On Yom Kippur the mess sergeant prepared the Break-the-Fast Meal utilizing the canned kosher foods sent by the National Jewish Welfare Board and he also prepared hot blintzes (cheese pancakes). In Da Nang, a Lithuanian mess sergeant was discovered who had been raised on latkes. He knew just how to prepare them. He was delighted to prepare the potato pancakes for the Chanukkah party. In Phu Bai, the Food Services Officer is Jewish and arranged for the preparation of the latkes, while in Chu Lai PFS Simon Wandzuch, Miami Beach, Florida, aided the mess cooks of the Marine Aircraft Group in the preparation of the latkes.

Congressman Resnick attended Chanukkah celebrations in the three enclaves. He brought greetings and gifts from the National Jewish Welfare Board and the American Jewish Community. After his introduction he spoke informally to the group and then he and the Chaplain distributed Chanukkah gifts to each of the men. During the fellowship hour which followed, the men became better acquainted with him. On the tape-recorder which the Congressman brought, messages were recorded by the men to their parents which he promised to deliver upon his return to New York.

The mezzuzahs which Congressman Resnick personally presented to each serviceman will be treasured by the men long after they leave Vietnam. They are especially meaningful because they were made in Israel and presented in Vietnam. The symbolism of the Israeli sterling silver mezzuzahs is particularly significant to men in combat. The symbolism included the figure of the Lion of Judah with the Hebrew inscription, El Shaddai, God Almighty. The Lion of Judah represents both physical strength and the strength of the Jewish people--their moral strength as well as their physical fortitude to survive and be victorious despite overwhelming odds, obstacles, and enemies. Both one's own strength, valor, sense of purpose and faith, as well as God's providence and protection are important to soldiers and Marines. With no front lines and the enemy all around, death lurks close by and becomes a horrible reality rather than a mere battlefield statistic in news reports. To men who continually face death, God's providence and protection assume a new meaning and importance.

Our celebration of Chanukkah wouldn't have been as meaningful, joyous, or colorful had it not been for the enthusiastic and wonderful support which we received from the American Jewish community. Support came from all types of student and