

“A Cobber”



By Jerry Klinger

It took quite awhile to find the gravesite where Glenn E. King’s remains were resting. A few weeks back, I had never heard of him until I began reading details of the history of the nascent Israeli Air Force.

November 29, 1947, the United Nations created a Jewish state and an Arab state within the Palestinian mandate areas. A week later the United States declared an arms embargo to the belligerents. In reality only one side was severely affected by the embargo – the Jews. The Arab side was protected by surrounding Arab states that sent in five armies to exterminate the Jews and the new born state the moment it was declared, May 14, 1948. Glenn King had died three weeks earlier in a horrific air crash. His C-46 lumbered down the runway of Mexico City, one engine began spitting and smoking as the plane strained to get off the ground. The ship clawed at the thin air, overloaded with a cargo of weapons bound for Israel before American FBI agents could stop them. The C-46 rose and crashed in a violent fiery orange ball of death. Glenn King, the flight engineer, was killed instantly. Bill Gerson, the pilot, died a few hours

later. They were the first casualties of the Israeli Air Force. Glenn was a Christian. Ironically a Christian was the first casualty of the Israeli Air Force.

Al Schwimmer, the legendary scrounger, who helped assemble the rudiments of an Air Force from thin air, flew to Mexico City to claim the bodies and bring them back to America. Glenn was 31. He left a widow and children.

The book I was reading said that Glenn was buried at the end of the Burbank, California runway. Rather curious imagery. I pictured three dark suited men with shovels burying King in the black of the night. Nothing more was noted about where he rested.

I was making a connection from Spokane to Burbank to Denver and continuing on to New York with a four hour layover in Burbank. It was an opportunity and a duty to try and find Glenn's grave and pay my respects to this forgotten hero. Perhaps even inappropriately for some, I wanted to say Kaddish at his grave.

A search of maps and the use of telephones, emails and with luck, I discovered there actually was a cemetery at the end of the Burbank runway, the Pierce Brothers, Valhalla Memorial Park Cemetery. The cemetery is the resting place for many famous early aviation pioneers. It was to be Glenn's resting place. I don't believe it was chosen because of the famous aviators. It was chosen because the Haganah Jewish defense forces used the then isolated and remote field to smuggle weapons out of the United States.

We, myself and the Hispanic groundskeeper, found the gravesite – a simple flush to the ground stone. It read : Glenn E. King, "*A Cobber*", 1917-1931.

"A Cobber"? What was a *Cobber*?

In Denver I researched what was a *cobber*? It was an Australian World War II word to mean friend. They would say to each other "Good day Cobber, Good Day friend". Curiously it is somewhat related to the Hebrew word Chaver. Pronounced very similarly, spelled very differently but both meant the same, who ever put the stone for Glenn King recognized him as *a friend*.

My final stop of the week was New York. I was invited by the American Veterans of Israel to come to West Point for an annual memorial service for Col. Mickey Marcus. He was a Jewish graduate of West Point who served America with duty and honor in World War II. When the struggle for Israel's life against those who wished to exterminate her became real, he volunteered to serve with the Israel Defense Forces. Marcus brilliantly reorganized and led the ramshackle virtually raw refugees fresh from the Death Camps of Europe. He created a disciplined fighting force to stop the five Arab armies who had invaded Israel. Marcus was a

brilliant tactician. One night he went outside of his lines to reconnoiter. Not speaking Hebrew he was stopped by a sentry who misunderstood the English answer and shot. Marcus tragically died just before the liberation of Jerusalem. His body was repatriated to the United States and he was interred at West Point.

The AVI has an annual service to remember Marcus. This year was no different but it was very different. The service to remember Marcus was also to honor and remember the non-Jewish friends of Israel who had served in the Israel Defense Forces during the War of Independence. The Jewish volunteers came for clear enough reasons. The world had stood largely silent and impotently immobile while Hitler and his supporters murdered 6,000,000 Jews. But the Christian volunteers were more of an enigma. They were few in number but they came just the same. They came for many different reasons. Some came for adventure, some came as mercenaries, some came for religious reasons but almost every one of them came because they knew it was the right thing to do. The Holocaust was not some vaguely know horror; it was a well known monstrosity of humanity destroying innocent humanity that they could not permit to happen again. They all knew that choosing to fight for Israel was most likely a fool's effort. They came just the same. Some never left. Some of them rest to this day in the soil of Israel honored, respected and as time and history has marched on, so have the memory of their names, but not this Sunday in West Point.

The AVI intended to recognize them this weekend, Sunday May 1, 2011 in a ceremony filled with pride, honor, respect and sorrow.

May 1, turned out to be a day of many meanings and feelings. May 1 was Yom Hashoah in the States. May 1 was the day that Hitler was confirmed dead. May 1 was the day that American Seals killed a modern Hitler – Ossama Bin Laden. May 1, 2011 was also the day that Jews and Christians gathered to remember their common effort to prevent another Holocaust of the Jewish people who had returned to Israel.

Old men, young Cadets, Christians and Jews, children, grandchildren and friends assembled in the Jewish Chapel at West Point overlooking the Hudson River Valley just starting to bud green with the life of spring.

The memorial program was called to order by Rafi Marom, the AVI Director. Marom's reading of a quote from the Cadet Prayer set the tone, *"Make us to choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong, and never to be content with a half truth when the whole can be won."*

The posting of the colors was presented by the Jewish War Veterans of America Color Guard. Immediately followed with the entire assembled singing the national Anthems of the United States and Israel.

Chaplain (Major) Shmuel Felsenberg , the Jewish Chaplain of West Point delivered the invocation. Six memorial candles were lit by cadets from the U.S. Military Academy and Jewish students.

Israel's Consul General to New York, Ido Aharoni spoke. "The Machal overseas volunteers – both Jews and Christians – proved to play an integral part in Israel's victory of the Independence Day War. Brothers in arms, yesterday and today, Jews, Christians, and Arabs continue to serve hand-in-hand in order to protect the State of Israel. It is because of this brotherhood that Israel has withstood, and continues to thrive, in the threat of destruction. As it is written in Isaiah 62:6-12, "I have posted watchmen on your walls, Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night."

The Keynote address was delivered by Chaplain (Colonel) Mike Durham of the USMA. Chaplain Durham is a protestant but for that moment in the Chapel we all were not Christians or Jews, we were one.

The names of the fallen were read out loud, slowly, with each name rising as a messenger of the past to a future of hope.

Amongst the assembled were ageing Christian veterans and families of those who had gone to help Israel in her time of near death travail. Augustine Labaczewski, or Duke as he preferred to be known, sat in the front row. He was a Polish Catholic from Philadelphia who learned to speak Yiddish better than most Jews when he worked in a Jewish bakery. After the war his friend, Mike Pearlstein invited him to join in smuggling desperate Holocaust survivors into Palestine. Duke served on two Haganah ships, the Hatikvah and the Trade Winds, before going ashore to join the Palmach and fight in the Galilee near Tiberias. He was asked to speak – but all he could say was "You have to continue doing the right thing, do the right thing." At a quieter moment he explained his motivations more clearly. , "I think that when you see six million[Jews] are killed, how can you not go?" During the fighting, he said, "The only thing I could feel was that we had to win, there was no losing there."

The brother of Canada's finest World War II fighter ace, Buzz Beurling, came to represent his brother. Buzz some said volunteered for the excitement but the reality was he came because of his deep personal faith. Buzz died in a crash in Italy. He was buried in Haifa with full military honors.

Scriptures were read, a benediction completed, the Chapel ceremony ended as the Colors were retired.

We walked out quietly to the bottom of the hill, to the West Point Military cemetery where Jew and Christian rest side by side. The memorial service for Col. Mickey Marcus was concluded as a lone bugler played taps and an honor guard of Cadets crisply fired their rifles in a unifying salute.

What I have learned over these past few years is that Israel exists not because of Jew or Christian alone but together as one with the ideals and hopes of many.

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