

‘WE SALUTE YOU, JOHN HENRY PATTERSON’ INSIDE THE EMBASSY



By:

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On the 4th of December 2014, the State of Israel held special ceremonies to mark the reburial of British officer Lt. Col. John Henry Patterson in the Land of Israel, thus honouring a key Christian Zionist figure who is considered the ‘godfather’ of today’s Israeli army. The International Christian Embassy Jerusalem was represented at the official ceremonies by media director David Parsons, who presented Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with a special replica medallion of the insignia worn by members of the Zion Mule Corps during World War One. Commanded by Patterson, this was the first organised Jewish military force since the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132 AD.

Patterson’s remains were re-interred alongside his wife’s, Francis, in moshav Avihayil, in a cemetery where many of the Jewish soldiers who served under his command are buried. It had been a long two-year process to bring Patterson’s ashes from California, where he had died in 1947 - just one year prior to the founding of the State of Israel.

After a most adventurous life and military career, Patterson’s dying wish had been to be buried near his Jewish troops in the soil of Israel. That wish had finally been granted, thanks to the efforts of his grandson, Alan Patterson, and to Jerry Klinger, President of Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation. The ceremonies also had great meaning for Prime Minister Netanyahu, due to his father’s very personal connection to Patterson.

Indeed, in a very moving speech, Netanyahu stated that Patterson was “the commander of the first Jewish fighting force in nearly two millennia... [Thus] “it’s an obligation of our people, our state, and of mine personally, to fulfil his testament”.

Netanyahu praised how Patterson offered “the wandering Jew, the wind tossed leaves”, an independent means of self-defence. Patterson’s radical vision for a Jewish army was a major step towards fulfilling the vision of Zionist leader Theodor Herzl of a secure nation-state for the Jews.

Patterson first led the Zion Mule Corps at the Battle of Gallipoli in 1915, a tragic loss for the British during the First World War. The following year, this logistical unit was reconstituted as a trained fighting force known as the Jewish Legion and took part in the campaign to drive the Turks out of

Palestine.

Legendary Jewish figures Ze'ev Jabotinsky and Joseph Trumpeldor both served as officers under Patterson's command. Later the leader of the Revisionist movement, Jabotinsky said of Patterson: "In all of Jewish history we have never had a Christian friend as understanding and devoted".

Born in 1867 in Ireland to a Protestant father and a Catholic mother, Patterson was eager to join the British army and feigned his age at 17 to join the Third Dragoon Guards in 1885. In 1888 he shot tigers in India, and the next year was sent to Kenya to deal with a pair of massive lions that had killed dozens of workers constructing a railway bridge across the Tsavo River. His book about this experience, entitled 'The Man-Eaters of Tsavo', became a best seller and eventually spawned two Hollywood movies.

He would later aid the expansion of the British Empire as a colonial officer in East Africa, but by the time World War Two broke out, he was considered a little too old for a battlefield command in the trenches of Western Europe. So he accepted an offer to command the Zion Mule Corps being recruited in Cairo at the prodding of Jabotinsky and Trumpeldor.

By the time the war ended, Patterson had trained and led into battle such notable Jewish figures as David Ben-Gurion (Israel's first prime minister), Levi Eshkol (Israel's second prime minister), Gershon Argon (Mayor of Jerusalem), Yaakov Dori (Haganah leader and first IDF Chief of Staff), and Eliyahu Golomb (founding member of the Haganah).

He had also become a fervent supporter of the Zionist cause. Following the war, Patterson often travelled with Jabotinsky to America on fund-raising tours and spoke in front of Jewish and Christian audiences enamoured with his exploits as a soldier and lion hunter.

When Jabotinsky later died in New York early in World War Two, Netanyahu's father, Professor Ben-Zion Netanyahu, took up the baton and accompanied Patterson on trips around America to continue the effort to raise money, volunteers and arms for a fighting force to defend the Jews of Palestine.

Out of this effort Ben-Zion Netanyahu and Patterson became close friends - so much so that Ben-Zion named his first son, Yonatan, after Patterson and asked that he serve as his godfather. In recounting this very personal story at Patterson's reburial ceremony, Benjamin Netanyahu also noted that his family still has an inscribed silver cup given by Patterson to 'Yoni' - a dashing soldier himself who would later die in the famous Entebbe raid.

Netanyahu described Patterson as "the godfather of the Israeli army" and stressed that he was not only "repaying a historical debt", but a "personal debt to a great friend of our people".

Patterson was well-read in the Bible and Jewish history, and had prayed to help lead the Jews into the Promised Land. He often spoke of the Jews' valiant past, urging them to take up again the "sword of David". Perhaps what endeared him to his Jewish troops the most was the way he treated them with dignity and challenged anti-Semitic attitudes within the British military culture of his day. Patterson was so proud of his Jewish legionnaires, he wrote two books about his experiences called 'With the Zionists at Gallipoli' (1916) and 'With the Judeans in Palestine' (1922).

So, just as Prime Minister Netanyahu respectfully closed his speech, we say: "We salute you, John Henry Patterson!"

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The replica medallions of the Zion Mule Corps, made with gold and silver, can be purchased through Embassy Resources at int.icej.org/store