

POW Master Sergeant Told Nazis, 'We Are All Jews'

By Clifford Kyle Jones - NCO Journal

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Near the end of World War II, Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds was the senior noncommissioned officer among a group of prisoners of war in Germany's Stalag IXA, near Ziegenhain.





Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds. (Courtesy of Yad Vashem)

Sometime in January 1945, German forces instructed all Jewish POWs to report the next morning. Edmonds was in charge of the prisoners, which included Jews and non-Jews. He ordered all of his Soldiers to stand together when the Jewish prisoners were to report.

When the German officer in charge saw that all the camp's inmates were standing in front of their barracks, he turned to Edmonds and said, "They cannot all be Jews."

"We are all Jews," Edmonds replied.

The German officer drew his pistol and threatened Edmonds, but the master sergeant was unfazed.

"According to the Geneva Convention, we have to give only our name, rank, and serial number," Edmonds told the German officer. "If you shoot me, you will have to shoot all of us, and after the war, you will be tried for war crimes."

The German officer stalked away.

A year ago today, Edmonds was honored as one of the Righteous Among the Nations — an official designation for non-Jews who risked their lives to protect Jews during the Holocaust. The designation is bestowed by Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust.

Edmonds is one of only five Americans to receive the honor, and the only American Soldier.

Last month, U.S. President Barack Obama honored Edmonds, as well as another American and a Polish couple named Righteous Among the Nations, at the first such Yad Vashem awards ceremony in the United States.

Obama quoted Edmonds in his address at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C., saying "We are all Jews" before warning of rising anti-Semitism and other bigotry.

"Too often, especially in times of change, especially in times of anxiety and uncertainty, we are too willing to give in to a base desire to find someone else, someone different, to blame for our struggles," Obama said Jan. 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day. "So here, tonight, we must confront the reality that around the world anti-Semitism is on the rise. We cannot deny it."





Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds (front row, second from left) at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. (Courtesy of Yad Vashem)

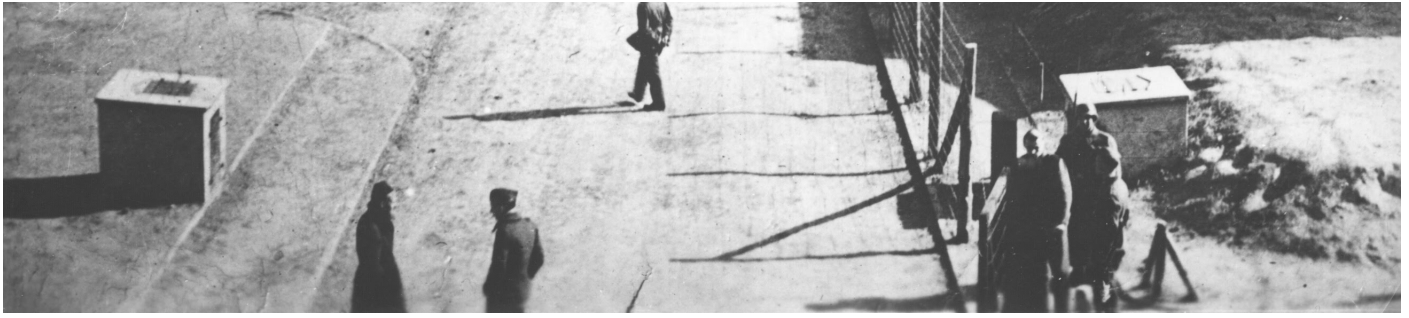
Edmonds, of Knoxville, Tennessee, was with the 422nd Infantry Regiment. He participated in the landing of American forces in Europe and was taken prisoner during the Battle of the Bulge.

Paul Stern, who was also taken prisoner during that battle, was Jewish and stood near Edmonds during the exchange. "Although seventy years have passed," Stern told Yad Vashem, "I can still hear the words he said to the German camp commander."

Lester Tanner, who had also been captured in the Battle of the Bulge, witnessed the exchange, as well.

Tanner had been inducted into military service in March 1943 and had trained at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, before being assigned to Edmonds' 422nd Infantry Regiment. Edmonds was the highest-ranking NCO in the 422nd, and Tanner remembered him well from his training.





The main street of Stalag IX A POW camp, near Ziegenhain, Germany. Photo taken in 1942. (Courtesy of Yad Vashem)

"He did not throw his rank around. You knew he knew his stuff, and he got across to you without being arrogant or inconsiderate. I admired him for his command, ..." Tanner said. "We were in combat on the front lines for only a short period, but it was clear that Roddie Edmonds was a man of great courage who led his men with the same capacity we had come to know him in the States."

Tanner told Yad Vashem that by January 1945, the POWs were well aware that the Germans were murdering Jews. They therefore understood that the order to separate the Jews from the other POWs meant that the Jews were in great danger.

"I would estimate that there were more than 1,000 Americans standing in wide formation in front of the barracks, with Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds standing in front of the formation with several senior noncoms beside him, of which I was one, ..." Tanner said. "There was no question in my mind or that of Master Sgt. Edmonds that the Germans were removing the Jewish prisoners from the general prisoner population at great risk to their survival. The U.S. Army's standing command to its ranking officers in POW camps is that you resist the enemy and care for the safety of your men to the extent possible. Master Sgt. Edmonds, at the risk of his immediate death, defied the Germans with the unexpected consequences that the Jewish prisoners were saved."

Chris Edmonds, Roddie's son and a pastor, told Yad Vashem that his father had kept a diary in the camp, where he also had other POWs write down their names and addresses.

Edmonds was recruited again during the Korean War. He died in 1985.

"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," Yad Vashem Chairman Avner Shalev said. "These attributes form the common thread that binds members of this select group of Righteous Among the Nations. 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."