Sephardic Heroes
of the World Wars
and a young man's quest to recognize them on
JewishWarGraves.org

Above: Sketch of British World War I hero, Lieutenant Frank Alexander de Pass, a Sephardic Jew, wearing his Victoria Cross.

Below: Headstone of Lieutenant de Pass, at Bethune Town Cemetery, in France.

*I*t started during a camping trip in Belgium in the summer of 2007. Bar mitzvah aged Daniel Levy's scout group took a trip to the World War I Flanders battlefields around the town of Ypres. Visiting several cemeteries, young Daniel noticed many headstones bearing the Jewish *magen david* symbol. While the young Briton had known that Jews served in the armed services, he never realized the scale of the sacrifice made by his people to the Allied forces. In one cemetery, he found a memorial stone dedicated to Marcus Leslie Marks, a member of the Australian Army Medical Corps, who died on October 4, 1917 – 77 years to the day before Daniel's birth in 1994. At that moment, all the memorial parades, all the poppies during November, and all the raw history came to life for him. It was there, in Tyne Cot cemetery on Passchendaele Ridge in Belgium, that a flame of remembrance was ignited within Daniel, an experience which would ultimately propel him to undertake a massive memorial project.

Military history had always been a topic of interest for Daniel, whose grandfather served as an electrical engineer in the Royal Air Force during the Berlin Airlift. And, as a member of a Sephardic family originally from Istanbul, Daniel is proud of his Middle Eastern roots and has always enjoyed being part of the long established Spanish and Portuguese Jew's Congregation in London. His great-grandfather, Reverend Nissim Levy, was the Orthodox minister (the titles "Reverend" and "Minister" are used in England in place of "Rabbi") at Holland Park Synagogue for over 50 years, and was among the congregation's founding members. Daniel's relationship with Holland Park Synagogue continues even

today. His grandparents are senior members of the congregation, and Daniel has spent many enjoyable Shabbatot with them at their house in West London.

He recalls how each week, as he would walk into synagogue, something would catch his eye: a memorial plaque listing the names of members who fell while serving in the British Armed Forces during the Second World War. The names on the board were seemed distant, and embedded too far in the past for Daniel to really understand them – until his 2007 trip to Belgium.

Finding the Fallen

A year after the scout trip, Daniel went back to the same battlefields with the objective of finding the graves of fallen Jews. His efforts were largely unsuccessful, as were his efforts the following year when he travelled to Normandy. Ironically, it was these otherwise fruitless trips that inspired the idea for JewishWarGraves.org, a first-ever website memorializing fallen Jewish soldiers from the two world wars.

Daniel spent an evening with Henry Morris, curator of the Jewish Military Museum, who produced a list of the names of the Jews who died fighting for the Commonwealth during the Second World War. His objective was to research each of these 2,500 men and women and catalogue any personal and burial details available, online for public record.

Daniel got to work, and a year later, on November 11 – the day when the United Kingdom remembers its fallen troops – the website was launched. Since then, he has been, happily he admits, inundated with emails containing new information, praise for his work and gratitude from people who saw their

Sketch of Sephardic-British WW II hero, Warrant Officer Mark Azouz, 196 Squadron – the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve.

British Empire. He was the first Jew to win this prestigious medal. Ordinarily, there would have been a *magen david* on his headstone, but the religious symbol was likely usurped by a military system that regarded a Victoria Cross as being more important than a man's faith. And so, to this day, it is the symbol of British honor that marks the grave of this fallen Jewish hero.

Sephardic Courage in World War II

One night in August, 1944, Warrant Officer Mark Azouz of 196 Squadron – the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve – was flying a mission over the Brest Peninsular of France with the objective of dropping supplies to the local resistance and supporting groups. Deep in enemy territory, his plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire, which caused severe damage to the propeller and reduction gear, inhibiting the plane's ability to manoeuvre. Instead of ejecting, Warrant Officer Azouz managed to complete his mission and return the plane safely to base. In recognition of his gallantry and devotion to duty, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross – the third highest decoration available to Commonwealth air force members.

The next month, on September 21, 1944, while on another mission across enemy lines, Azouz's plane was raked by enemy gunfire. The entire crew except Azouz, who was piloting, and the tail gunner, Flight Sergeant Peter Harold Bode, abandoned the aircraft. The plane was further savaged by enemy attacks until it was brought down, killing the two remaining crewmen. Mark Azouz is today buried in Jonkerbos War Cemetery in Holland.

relative's eternal memorial on the internet. Currently, the site offers information about Jews who fell during the Second World War, and preliminary research about the fallen soldiers of the First World War has already begun.

Over the course of his research, Daniel learned of two members of the Spanish and Portuguese Jew's Congregation who died in action and were awarded medals for their acts of heroism.

A Sephardic World War I Hero

Lieutenant Frank Alexander de Pass of the 34th Prince Albert Victor's Own Poona Horse was a cavalry officer commanding an Indian unit. On November 24, 1914, he captured and destroyed a vital part of a German trench under a heavy barrage of rifle fire and the concussion of grenades. He then rescued a wounded comrade who was lying in the open within easy reach of the enemy.

Unfortunately, the Germans recaptured the trench, and Frank de Pass lost his life the next day. He was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross – the highest military decoration bestowed by the

"These two war heroes inspire me every day," Daniel explains. "They were people from my own community who not only showed exemplary conduct as Jews – but also tremendous bravery as British citizens."

And thanks to Daniel's ongoing efforts to memorialize their legacy, the rest of the world can similarly be inspired by the immense sacrifices made by these courageous individuals on behalf of their country, community, and beliefs.

Daniel Levy, founder of
JewishWarGraves.org