Obituary: Sgt. Roddie Edmonds (? - 1985)
U.S. Soldier Honored Posthumously For Protecting Jewish POWs In 1945

Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds has been recognized posthumously by the Yad Vashem Holocaust remembrance center as Righteous Among the Nations — an honor for non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.
Courtesy of Yad Vashem/AP

In January 1945, in a German POW camp, a U.S. soldier named Roddie Edmonds defied the threat of death to protect the Jewish troops under his command.

Seventy years later, he's being recognized for his valor.

It's the first time a U.S. soldier has been named Righteous Among the Nations, an honor from Israel's Holocaust remembrance and research center reserved for non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.

Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds of Knoxville, Tenn., was a noncommissioned officer who participated in the landing of U.S. forces in Europe. He was captured in the Battle of the Bulge, writes Israel's Holocaust memorial center, Yad Vashem.

Edmonds was held at a Nazi POW camp near Ziegenhain, Germany, where he was the highest-ranking American soldier.

When the Germans demanded that all the Jewish POWs in the camp identify themselves, Edmonds ordered *all* the U.S. soldiers to step forward — hundreds of them.
When the German camp commander saw all the inmates reporting, he said, "They cannot all be Jews!" according to Yad Vashem.

"We are all Jews," Edmonds replied. He cited the Geneva Conventions and refused to identify any prisoners by religion, Yad Vashem writes.

His son, Chris Edmonds, tells NPR's Emily Harris that the Nazi officer became enraged.

"He turned blood-red, pulled his Luger out, pressed it into the forehead of my dad, and said, 'I'll give you one more chance. Have the Jewish men step forward or I will shoot you on the spot,' "Edmonds said.

"They said my dad paused, and said, 'If you shoot, you'll have to shoot us all.' "

The officer backed down.

One of the Jewish POWs, NCO Paul Stern, told Yad Vashem, "Although 70 years have passed, I can still hear the words he said to the German camp commander."

Another Jewish soldier in the camp, Lester Tanner, said the soldiers were well aware of the risk they'd face if they were identified as Jewish, and he called Roddie Edmonds "a man of great courage" for risking death to protect them.

Edmonds died in 1985.

Chris Edmonds says he learned about what happened from survivors after his father died.

Roddie Edmonds was recognized as Righteous Among The Nations on Wednesday. He's one of only five Americans to have received the honor, and the first U.S. soldier.