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## Research Article

# Captain Ben Salomon (1914-1944)

## Article

Ben Salomon was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on September 1, 1914. He graduated from the Dental College of University of South Carolina in 1937 and soon began a dental practice. When the United States entered the war, his patriotic instinct led him to enroll in the army in 1940. After basic training, he joined the 102nd Infantry Regiment and quickly proved to be a natural soldier with weapons and a leader. Within a year, he had risen to the rank of sergeant and was in charge of a machine gun section. In 1942, Salomon was to become an officer in the Dental Corps. He first tried to remain in the infantry, and his commanding officer requested that he be promoted to second lieutenant of infantry: a request which was first denied. It is finally in Hawaii that he was commissioned a first lieutenant on 14 August 1942. After several months working in a hospital, Lieutenant Salomon was assigned in May 1943 as the regimental dental officer of the 105th Infantry Regiment, which was part of the 27th Infantry Division. Even though he had not practiced dentistry for two years, Lieutenant Salomon was quickly recognized as an excellent dentist by his patients and his fellow dentists.

In 1944, newly promoted to the rank of Captain, he experienced his first taste of battle in the campaign for reconquering Saipan in the Marianne Islands with the 105th Infantry Regiment. Salomon soon replaced a surgeon who had been wounded in a mortar attack on June 22. On July 7, during a Japanese attack, his battalion being outflanked, he got hold of a submachine gun while he wearing a Red Cross armband and repelled the attacking forces at the cost of his life so that the wounded soldiers and the nursing staff could be evacuated. The soldiers and staff were saved. There were ninety-eight Japanese bodies piled up around him. His heroism was only

officially acknowledged 57 years later. Indeed, it was refused any recognition because at the time of his death, Salomon wore a Red Cross brassard upon his arm and bore arms against the enemy.

In 2002, President George W. Bush signed an order awarding Solomon posthumously the Congressional Medal of Honor. He is the only dentist to have received this decoration.

Dr Hernan Reyes from the International Committee of the Red Cross accepted to explain what might seem as a paradox though it is not: *“The nursing staff has indeed the role to protect the wounded and the sick. To bear arms is therefore solely authorized to protect these people. During the Second World War, let’s take the example of a French wounded man who would have succeeded in stealing his pistol within the country hospital sheltering wounded men from the two camps, and who would have started to shoot on all the German wounded men being there and who would not obey the order of ceasing fire formulated by the nursing staff. This one would have the right to shoot at this armed man to protect the others. The staff would also have the right to retaliate if a wounded man, whoever he is, would shoot at the nursing staff within the hospital which is considered a neutral place.*

*However, if an enemy would attack a hospital with its infantry, the nursing staff would not have the right to “occupy the windows” and to return fire like in a bunker. The staff would have to hoist the Red Cross flag and try to make its neutrality respected. That being said, and resulting logically from what was said above, if nevertheless the enemy would enter armed and hostile within this hospital, if he would begin to kill the wounded soldiers of the other camp, nobody could reproach the nursing staff to intervene, even with their weapons, while acknowledging that this is pointless and detrimental to everyone because they would get killed and moreover, they would never be able to testify against this obvious breach of the neutrality of the hospitals.”*

Captain Edmund G. Love, an historian from the 27th division [1] who was among those who came back on their previous positions hold on July 6th by the 1st and 2nd battalions, described much later what they had found: *“We were walking on a pile of dead soldiers when all of a sudden, the general started to run towards the face of a man lying on a heavy machine gun. The general then took a knife and cut the Red Cross armband on Ben Salomon’s arm...”*

This general did not hold Salomon's head to see if he was still breathing, neither to identify him nor to cry him. He withdrew the Red Cross armband because this soldier thought that a reprehensible act had been committed. A doctor wearing that particular arm band had borne arms and had shot enemies, which was not acceptable in the American army because it was a breach of the Geneva Conventions.

At the start of 1945, when the captain integrated the 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, he demanded a medal for Salomon's bravery. This demand was approved by Colonel O'Brien and Sergeant Baker. This recommendation was sent back to him with a handwritten refusal from Major George W. Griner, the Commanding Officer of the 27<sup>th</sup> division.

*"It saddens me not to be able to approve the attribution of a medal to Captain Salomon even if, on principle, he deserves it. At the time of his death, this officer was serving in the medical department and was wearing an armband of the Red Cross. According to the laws of the Geneva Conventions, which the United States signed, no medical officer can bear arms against the enemy."*

After the war, in 1946, Love wrote an article on Salomon's feat in battle. When reading it, Secretary of War Judge Paterson asked him to demand a medal again and to inform Salomon's father on the details of his death. This became difficult. The first demand for a medal was not kept in the archives and the main witnesses were dead. He finally was able to demand a medal in 1951 but met the then new Secretary of War's refusal who did not know the story. This new refusal was this time due to the expiration of the deadline to issue such a demand for facts which happened during the Second World War.

In 1968, Doctor John I. Ingle, the dean of the Dental College of University of South Carolina, also demanded a medal for Salomon. He contacted Major General Robert B. Shira, chief of the Army Dental Corps and asked him to reopen the case. This new step was even arduous and took a year.

After careful study from the 1929 Geneva Conventions by the office of the Judge Advocate General, article 8 previously quoted was raised again. Henceforth, the accusation of the breach of the aforementioned Conventions by the dentist was rejected and the attribution of the medal became legitimate. The new recommendation was approved on July 21, 1970. Going from commission to commission, coming up against the long administration, the Medal of Honor Authorized by the

US Congress was finally attributed to him on May 1, 2002 by George Bush himself.

The name of Ben Salomon was consequently given to a dental clinic in Fort Brenning.

116 dentists died during the war: 20 on the battle field, 5 because of injuries, 10 in custody and 81 following a disease or injuries which occurred outside the battlefield.



Captain Ben L. Salomon (1914-1944) (public domain).

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