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HVL LESSON TITLE:

THE “H” ON DOG TAGS

DEVELOPED BY: ERIN COGGINS

THE “H” ON DOG TAGS

GUIDING QUESTION:

Would you put an “H” on your
dog tags?

OVERVIEW:

Approximately 550,000 Jewish Americans fought in World War II. To ensure proper burial ritual, soldiers were required to wear dog tags that included a single letter representing their religion. This lesson will allow students to put themselves in the shoes of Jewish-American soldiers to decide whether or not they would agree to having the “H” for Hebrew engraved on their dog tags.



SUBJECT(S):
Social Studies/English



WWII VETERAN(S):
Howard Polin



DURATION:
60 minutes

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“I knew they [The Germans] had concentration camps. I knew that they were starving and molesting these people. I knew that if I were ever captured by the Germans, I would be in sad shape.”

WWII Veteran Howard Polin

OVERVIEW:

Approximately 550,000 Jewish Americans fought in World War II. To ensure proper burial ritual, soldiers were required to wear dog tags that included a single letter representing their religion. This lesson will allow students to put themselves in the shoes of Jewish-American soldiers to decide whether or not they would agree to having the “H” for Hebrew engraved on their dog tags.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

Dog tags were first used in America during the Civil War. By World War I, dog tags had become standardized and were issued by the military to identify the dead. During these wars, dog tags included a name and later a serial number.

Dog tags in World War II contained more information, including a single letter to designate soldiers’ religion. Knowing the Nazi’s hatred for the Jewish race, adding the letter “H” became a worry for Jewish Americans serving in the war.

Although Prisoners of War were protected by the 1929 Geneva Convention’s Treatment of Prisoners of War, these soldiers were unsure if the Germans would adhere to the agreement.

OBJECTIVES:

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to

- Cite textual evidence to support the analysis of primary and secondary sources.
- Write an argument to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

STANDARDS:

NCSS: Standard D

Develop critical sensitivities such as empathy and skepticism regarding attitudes, values, and behaviors of people in different historical contexts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4-12.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4-12.1: Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

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MATERIALS & DOCUMENTS

[Howard Polin HVL Video](#)

Dog Tag Photos (Doc A)

In Their Shoes Handout (Doc B)

Essay Prompt and Rubric (Doc C)

PROCEDURES

ACTIVITY 01

- Show the [Howard Polin HVL Video](#)
- After the video, ask students the following:
Why would Mr. Polin comment on the results of being captured by the Germans?
- Tell students that like Mr. Polin, other Jewish Americans fought in World War II. In fact, approximately 550,000 Jewish Americans took an oath to fight for the country, and that like Mr. Polin recognized the grim situation they would possibly be in if captured by the Germans.
- Project the photo of the dog tags (Doc A)
Explain to students that “H” meant Hebrew, thus revealing the soldiers’ religious belief to would be captors. NOTE: Also inform students that the letter “P” was used to designate Protestants and “C” for Catholics.

ACTIVITY 02

- Distribute the In Their Shoes Handout (Doc B). This may be completed individually with a discussion to follow or the teacher do the activity together as a class.

ACTIVITY 03

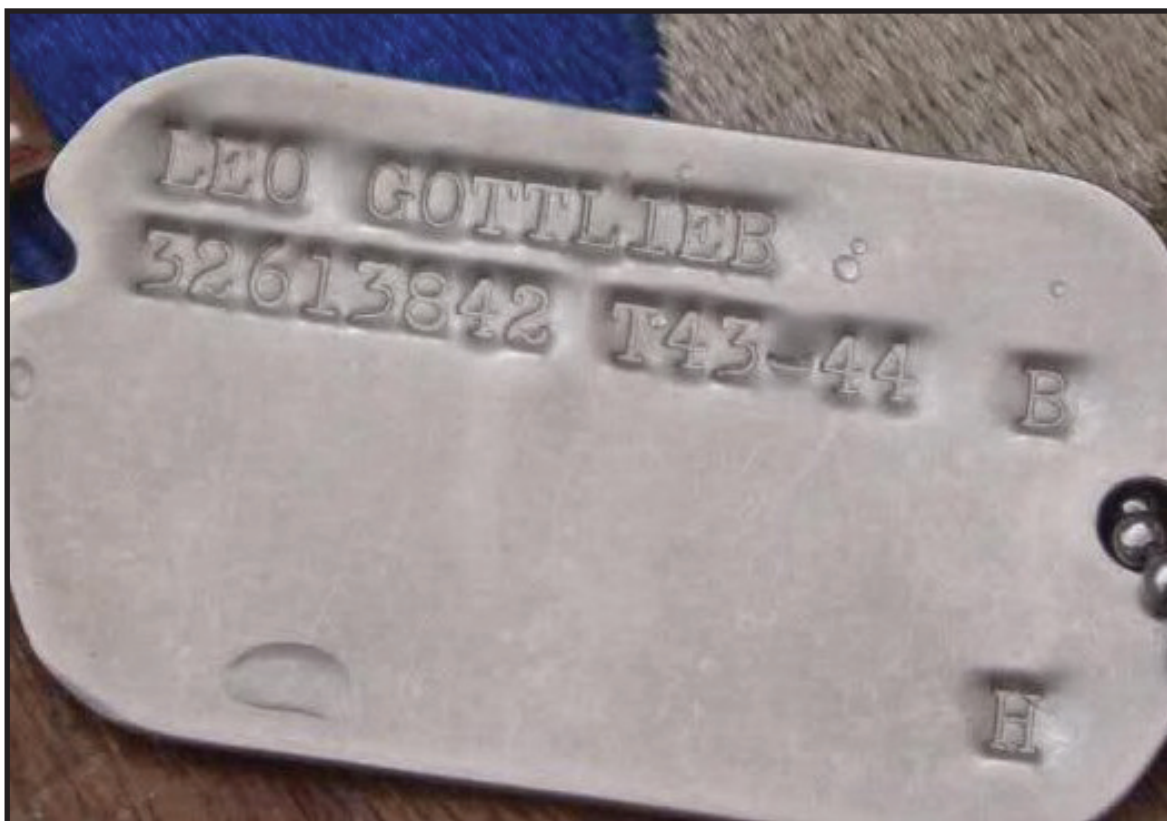
- Distribute the Essay Prompt and Rubric (Doc C). Read the prompt and directions aloud as students follow along.
- Give students time to write their essay.

METHODS FOR EXTENSION

- Artistic Representation: Students could create a visual representation of their dog tags with chosen personal symbols and explain their choices in a written or oral explanation.

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DOG TAG PHOTO



[Link to Digital Photo](#)

THE “H” ON DOG TAGS IN THEIR SHOES HANDOUT

DOC B



1929 Treatment of Prisoners of War Geneva, Switzerland

The 1929 Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War was an international treaty signed on July 27, 1929, that set standards for the humane treatment of prisoners of war (POWs) during armed conflict. It mandated that POWs receive respectful treatment, be protected from violence and public curiosity, and be provided with adequate food, clothing, and medical care.

If you were Jewish/Hebrew and aware of the Germans' persecution of the Jewish population, would you have had the “H” engraved on your dog tag? Why or why not?

American Newspaper Headlines

[“Nazis Hear an Echo of World Opinion” \(March 26, 1933\)](#)

This editorial notes that world public opinion has condemned Germany's persecution of Jews and highlights the suspension of the rights of Jewish people.

“Nazis Smash, Loot and Burn Jewish Shops and Temples” (November 10, 1938): This front-page headline, along with other extensive reporting on Kristallnacht, described the nationwide riots and violence against Jews across Germany and Austria.

“Tens of Thousands of Jews Massacred by German Units” (October 26, 1941): This buried report on page six was one of the earliest accounts of the “Holocaust by Bullets,” where mass shootings were used to exterminate Jews in Eastern Europe.

Do these headlines in American newspapers change your previous decision of whether or not to put a “H” on your dog tag? Why or why not?

THE “H” ON DOG TAGS IN THEIR SHOES HANDOUT

FIRST HAND ACCOUNTS

In a letter to the editor of The New York Times, dated June 22, 1994, Paul Lippman of Hoboken, New Jersey wrote:

... Many Jewish G.I.s omitted from their dog-tags the indication that their religious identity was Jewish for the prudent reason that in the event of falling into German hands, their lives would be at greater risk if they were identifiable as Jewish... As a combat veteran I know that my dog-tags and those of many of my Jewish companions were religiously anonymous.

In a 1999 San Diego Jewish Press–Heritage article about WWII-era

Jewish US prisoners of war, several soldiers’ experiences are reported. Seymour Brenner was

... a field medic when he was captured in France after being knocked unconscious by an artillery blast. A quick thinking non-Jewish member of his unit broke Brenner’s dog-tag in half, burying in the snow the part which had the “H” for his religion engraved upon it. When their capturers asked why Brenner’s dog-tags were broken, the buddy said it was because they had been engraved with the wrong blood type and were expected to be replaced. The lie may have saved Brenner’s life. Unaware that he was a Jew, the Germans decided to use his training as a medic to treat fellow prisoners at Stalag 5-A, which they reached after a 14-day forced march ‘without food or water.’”

In the same article, the author writes of Sam Kimbarow:

... threw away his US Army dog-tags identifying him as a Jew before he was captured by German soldiers during World War II’s famous Battle of the Bulge. Later, at a camp for prisoners of war, he was in the middle of a crowd when a German officer asked if there were any Jews among the prisoners. About five American soldiers stepped forward, but Kimbarow was not among them. He watched as they were led away to uncertain futures.

Kimbarow added,

... “What we did was to deny our mothers and fathers,” he said. “It was a terrible mental thing.” ... He recalled that “a guy wrote a letter in a Jewish newspaper that he still has nightmares because one of the other (Jewish) guys met him years later and told him “you walked away and let me take it.”

Those who were separated went through hell; most of them died in the camp. And those of us who survived had a tremendous guilt feeling . . .”

Do these first-hand accounts change your mind about whether or not you would include your Jewish religion on your dog tag? Why or why not?

If you were not Jewish and had a fellow soldier in the circumstances as these soldiers, what would you have done? Explain your reasoning.

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ESSAY PROMPT AND RUBRIC



PROMPT: Imagine you are a Jewish American soldier during World War II. You have been issued dog tags with an “H” to identify your religion. You are about to be deployed to Germany where you are aware of the Nazi’s persecution of Jews.

Use the questions below to write a complete 5-paragraph essay. When necessary, utilize primary and secondary sources to support your answers.

- How would you feel about having an “H” on your dog tags?
- Would you try to hide your Jewish identity, or would you display it proudly?
- How do you think being Jewish and having to fight in Germany might affect your experience during the war?

Historical Understanding	Ethical Reflection	Evidence	Clarity and Organization
The essay demonstrates a clear understanding of the historical context of WWII, particularly the significance of the “H” on dog tags for Jewish soldiers.	The student engages with the ethical dilemma and provides a reasonable explanation for their decision.	The essay cites at least 2 primary sources and 1 secondary source to support the position of the writer.	The essay is well-organized with clear and concise arguments, and is free from major grammatical or spelling errors.
30 points	20 points	30 points	20 points
COMMENTS	COMMENTS	COMMENT	COMMENT