



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

Grade Level: 4 - 12

Era: World War II

Standards Alignment:

### 1. Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for ELA:

These standards emphasize critical thinking, comprehension, and communication skills, which are integral to the discussions and reflective activities in the lesson.

#### Reading Standards for Informational Text (Grades 4-12):

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4-12.1:** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
  - *Application:* Students can use textual evidence from Harold Block’s account or other materials provided to support their reflections on identity and decisions made by Jewish soldiers.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4-12.2:** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
  - *Application:* Students summarize the key points from the historical background on dog tags and the challenges faced by Jewish soldiers.

#### Writing Standards (Grades 4-12):

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4-12.1:** Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
  - *Application:* In the reflective essay or journal entry, students can argue whether they would identify as Jewish if they were in WWII, using evidence from the lesson.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4-12.3:** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.
  - *Application:* The essay or journal entry can include a narrative element where students imagine themselves as a soldier during WWII.

#### Speaking and Listening Standards (Grades 4-12):



- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4-12.1:** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade-level topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
  - *Application:* The class discussions on ethical dilemmas and identity decisions align with these speaking and listening standards.

## 2. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Standards:

These standards focus on promoting civic competence through understanding history, geography, economics, and culture.

### Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

- **Standard D:** Develop critical sensitivities such as empathy and skepticism regarding attitudes, values, and behaviors of people in different historical contexts.
  - *Application:* Students analyze the decisions of Jewish soldiers and reflect on how they might have acted in a similar situation, fostering empathy and understanding of historical context.

### Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

- **Standard F:** Identify and describe the influence of perceptions, attitudes, values, and beliefs on personal identity.
  - *Application:* The lesson focuses on how Jewish soldiers' identities influenced their decisions during WWII and how students perceive their own identities through the dog tag activity.

### Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

- **Standard C:** Locate, access, analyze, organize, and apply information about selected public issues recognizing and explaining multiple points of view.
  - *Application:* Students explore the complex issue of identity in wartime, considering different perspectives on whether to conceal or reveal their Jewish identity.

**Note on how to use this lesson:** This lesson should be adapted for different age groups. Younger students can focus on the 'make your own dog tags' activity and identify personal symbols. For older students, a more discussion-oriented approach is appropriate. The "make your own dog tags" activity may be used as homework or omitted.



## **Background:**

Dog tags were first used in America during the Civil War when soldiers would pin notes to their uniforms to help identify them in case they were killed. By World War One, dog tags had become standardized and were issued by the military. They contained the name and serial number of the service member.

By World War II, more information was included. To ensure proper burial ritual, dog tags included a single letter:

- P – Protestant
- C – Catholic
- H – Jewish

The intent was to honor religious beliefs. An estimated 550,000 American Jews served in World War II. For some of those Jews who went to fight against Nazi Germany in Europe, the H (for Hebrew) was something to worry about. Though the full extent of the Holocaust was not yet known to the average service member before the camps were discovered, Nazi policies toward Jews were clear since the 1930s. Soldiers heard rumors of horrors. There was no doubt that Jews were being killed in camps.

Being at risk of capture by the Germans was a frightening prospect. The Geneva Conventions were supposed to provide humane protection to prisoners of war (POW). But would the Nazis adhere to the agreement?

Many captured servicemembers did identify themselves as Jews to their German captors. But some POWs attempted to hide their Jewish identity. In the included report, Harold Block described being captured at a 1943 raid on oil refineries in Ploesti, Romania. He told his German captors he was a Methodist and feels fortunate he had a set of Army-issued dog tags without the “H” that identified him as Jewish. In a similar situation, Sy Brenner had a comrade grab his dog tags, cut them in two and discard the half with the “H” identifier before they were captured. Bob Tolley, a non-Jew, described hollowing out the heel of his boot to hide his Jewish buddy’s dog tags with the “H.”

Others took pride in showing their Jewish identity and emphasized it by wearing a mezuzah or Zionist symbols attached to their dog tags. Others took even larger steps to assert their Jewish identity while attacking the Germans. On D-Day, Harold Baumgarten wore a field jacket with a Star of David and the words "The Bronx" drawn on the back. He'd later say he wore it "to let Hitler know who I was."

## **Supplementary video:**

Spirit, Courage and Conviction: A Tour of the National Museum of American Jewish Military History - <https://youtu.be/9vn7N2YjO4M>

## **Lesson:**

1. Instructor-led discussion question:



- What do you know about POW camps?
  - What do you know about the different kinds of prisoner camps that existed in Europe during WWII?
  - What is the difference between a concentration camp and a POW Camp?
  - How did an American get to be in the military during the time of WWII?
  - Do you think Jewish Americans had any special feelings when fighting in Europe during World War II?
  - Why do you think these were called dog tags?
2. Show students the letter H in the bottom right corner of the dog tags and ask them to guess what it might stand for. Explain that it stood for Hebrew and was used to identify Jewish service members. Show images included here.
  3. Read Harold Block's account of being captured by the Germans and his thoughts on his dog tags.
  4. Discuss what the students think of Harold Block's decision to identify himself as Methodist.
  5. Discuss whether each student would choose to identify himself as Jewish if they were going to serve in Europe during World War II.
  6. What other personal symbols would they choose to include on their own dog tags?
  7. Discuss personal symbols and have the students think about what could define them on a tag. Have students make their own dog tags using the attached template.

#### Resources:



Harold Block's account of mission and being taken prisoner by the Germans written in POW camp after capture:



# SAGA OF 'BREWERY WAGON'

AUGUST 1, 1943

## COMBAT CREW

LT. JOHN D. PALM, P.  
LT. WILLIAM LOVE, CO-P  
LT. WILLIAM WRIGHT, N  
LT. MERRILL B  
T/SGT. ALEXANDER P. ROCKINSON, ENG.  
T/SGT. HAROLD BLOCK, R.O.  
S/SGT. WILLIAM THOMPSON, A.E.  
S/SGT. AUSTIN P. CHASTAIN, A.R.O.  
S/SGT. CLAY E. SNYDER, A.G.  
S/SGT. DALLIS ROBERTSON, A.G.

BEING IN THE WAIST OF THE SHIP AND SEEING THAT  
WE WERE HEADED FOR THE GROUND, I HELD ON FOR

DEAR LIFE TO THE RIGHT WAIST BRACING OF THE  
ARMOR STEEL PLATE. ABOUT A SECOND OR TWO  
LATER A CRASH CRACKING GRINDING SOUND TOOK  
PLACE ACCOMPANIED BY A TERRIFIC SHAKING AS THE  
CAMERA HATCH, GUN AND CORRUGATED PARAPET



WALK WAS HURLED WITH LIGHTNING SPEED TO THE TOP OF THE FUSELAGE. THE CRACKED UP SHIP WHOSE INTERIOR WAS NOW A MASS OF DEBRIS AND FOG FILLED DUST LAY STILL ON ITS BELLY. SPYING THE MISSHAPEN WAIST WINDOW I CRAWLED THROUGH AS I FELT A FUNNY SENSATION ALONG MY RIGHT SIDE. GETTING OUTSIDE IT WAS DIFFICULT FOR ME TO STAND ERECT. NOT KNOWING OF ANY BOMB RELEASE AND THAT WE HAD INCENDIARIES ATTACHED TO OUR THOUSAND POUNDERS, I BECAME FRANTIC AND STARTED TO RUN BUT SOON FELL ON MY FACE. I CRAWLED ALONG THE GROUND AND WAS PICKED UP BY TWO GERMAN SOLDIERS WHO WITH THEIR RIFLES READY WERE CREEPING TOWARD THE SHIP.



WE WERE SOON TAKEN TO AN OBSERVATION POST WHERE WE AWAITED TRANSPORTATION TO A REGULAR FIRST AID STATION WHILE THE ENGINEER AND PILOT WAITED FOR AN AMBULANCE WHICH SOON ARRIVED TO TAKE THEM DIRECTLY TO A HOSPITAL. IT IS NEEDLESS TO SAY THAT AT THE FIRST AID STATION WERE MANY WOUNDED AND DYING. WHILE HERE SOME OF THE LESS SEVERE CASES WERE INTERROGATED. THAT EVENING WE LEFT FOR A NEARBY GERMAN PRISON WHERE WE WERE TO AWAIT A CONVEYANCE TO THE LUFTWAFFE<sup>2</sup> HOSPITAL.

WHILE AT THE PRISON CAMP I WAS INTERROGATED AS TO MY NAME, RANK, SERIAL NUMBER, ADDRESS AND RELIGION. THE GERMAN INTELLIGENCE OFFICER SOON FOUND ALL THE INFORMATION HE DESIRED FROM MY DOG TAGS. — HOWEVER SEEING THAT MY RELIGION WAS MISSING FROM THE IDENTIFICATION TAG, HE INQUIRED WHAT FAITH I WAS. I REPLIED 'METHODIST' ALTHOUGH I AM JEWISH. (BEFORE GOING OVERSEAS I HAD TWO SETS OF DOG TAGS MADE, ONE WITH MY RELIGION AND ONE

WITHOUT. WHEN FLYING COMBAT I ALWAYS CARRIED THE  
LATTER. — NEVER THE LESS, TWO WEEKS LATER WHILE  
AT SINAI HOSPITAL A ROUMANIAN INTELLIGENCE OFFICE,  
ACCOMPANIED BY GERMAN OFFICER, VIOLENTLY ACCUSED  
ME OF BEING OF HEBREW ORIGIN. I REPLIED DEFINI-  
NITELY I WASNT BUT THEY INSISTED I WAS. (THEY USED  
THE NAME METHOD OF WHICH THE GERMANS HAVE VOLUMES  
ASKING ME IF MY PARENTS WERE BORN IN AMERICA  
I SAID YES. THE ROUMANIAN CAPTAIN THEN FELT  
HAPPY AND SAID IT WAS O.K. —

THUS MY EXPERIENCE AS A PRISONER OF WAR  
BEGAN.

T/SGT. HAROLD BLOCK  
12039839



WWI Dog Tags:



WWII Dog Tags



Julius Goldstein's WWII dog tags had no religious identifier



Harry Liskowsky wore a mezuzah on his WWII dog tags

Abraham Penn wore a chip with the Hebrew letter He to indicate his religion



Make your own dog tags:

Two rows of two dog tag templates each, and two larger dog tag templates below. The top two rows are pre-filled with text, while the bottom two are blank.

Row 1 (Left):  
Your Name  
Your number  
Your Personal Symbol  
Religion

Row 1 (Right):  
Your Name  
Your number  
Your Personal Symbol  
Religion

Row 2 (Left):  
[Blank]

Row 2 (Right):  
[Blank]

Row 3 (Large):  
[Blank]

Row 4 (Large):  
[Blank]



### Assessment Activity: Reflective Essay or Journal Entry

**Objective:** To assess students' comprehension of the historical content and their ability to engage with the ethical and personal identity questions posed by the lesson.

#### Prompt:

"Imagine you are a Jewish American soldier during World War II. You've been issued dog tags with an 'H' to identify your religion. You are about to be deployed to Europe, where you know the Nazis are persecuting Jews. Reflect on the following questions in a short essay or journal entry:

- How would you feel about having the 'H' on your dog tags?
- Would you try to hide your Jewish identity, or would you display it proudly? Why?
- How do you think your decision might affect your experience during the war?
- What personal symbols would you choose to represent yourself on your dog tags, and why?"

#### Rubric:

- **Historical Understanding (30%):**
  - The essay demonstrates a clear understanding of the historical context of World War II, particularly the significance of the 'H' on dog tags for Jewish soldiers.
- **Ethical Reflection (30%):**
  - The student thoughtfully engages with the ethical dilemma of whether to reveal or hide their Jewish identity and provides a reasoned explanation for their decision.
- **Personal Connection (20%):**
  - The student effectively connects the lesson to their own identity by selecting personal symbols and explaining their significance.
- **Clarity and Organization (20%):**
  - The essay is well-organized, with clear, coherent arguments, and is free from major grammatical or spelling errors.

#### Alternative Assessment Option:

If writing an essay is not suitable for all students, you could offer alternatives such as:

- **Oral Presentation:** Students can present their reflections orally to the class or in a small group.
- **Artistic Representation:** Students could create a visual representation (e.g., drawing, collage) of their dog tags with chosen personal symbols and explain their choices in a short written or oral explanation.