



A victory in fight to preserve Ammunition Hill

BY [MICHELE CHABIN](#) | PUBLISHED MAY 3, 2017 | [ISRAEL](#)

One of the most sacred military sites in Israel's history, left crumbling for years, is a now a gleaming attraction that helps tell the dramatic story of what happened there during Israel's victory

in the Six-Day War, thanks in part to the family of Larry Russ, a Los Angeles philanthropist with deep ties to Israel and its past.

Ammunition Hill's significance goes back to June 6, 1967, when, in the dead of night, roughly 350 Israeli soldiers accomplished something many thought was impossible — they captured the heavily fortified military base in Jordanian-occupied East Jerusalem.

The Jordanians, who had seized control of the British-built bunkers and trenches on the hill during the 1948 war — cutting off Mount Scopus and the Hadassah Medical Center — were fierce fighters, but the Israelis, who were literally fighting for their country's survival, prevailed within several hours.

Thirty-six Israeli soldiers and 71 Jordanians were killed in the battle, one of the fiercest of the Six-Day War. Ammunition Hill became a national memorial site in 1987.

Over the years, the number of visitors to the site did not increase, reaching a point in 2005 where the Israeli government decided to shutter it for a day because of a lack of funds. The Ammunition Hill-National Heritage & Memorial Site organization urgently reached out to the Jewish National Fund (JNF) for help.

That's when Rami Ganor, JNF's former Ammunition Hill liaison, approached Russ, a lawyer, L.A.-based JNF board member and philanthropist, to support this process.

"JNF knew it had to act," said Yoel Rosby, the current liaison. "Ammunition Hill is a pearl in Jerusalem's history. Closing it would be like closing Gettysburg."

Russ was intrigued.

"Rami knew I was a child of Holocaust survivors and had a big family in Israel," he said in an interview. "There are more Russes in Israel than the U.S."

Further impetus came from Shimon “Katcha” Cahaner, who was the deputy battalion commander in one of the two brigades that captured Ammunition Hill. After his commander was wounded, Cahaner brought his troops into the Old City. Cahaner joined up with the JNF to save the site.

“Katcha came to Los Angeles to raise funds to improve Ammunition Hill,” Russ recalled. “He said he wanted to build a geographic table that showed the dividing line between what was then Israel and Jordan. That sounded doable, and I made a commitment. Then he said, ‘Maybe there should be a cover over it because it gets hot in the summer.’ ”

At the request of Cahaner and JNF, Russ and his wife, Sunny, visited Jerusalem, where they met with historians, an architect and soldiers who had fought at Ammunition Hill and their families.

“We were crying, it was so emotional,” Russ recalled. “We said, ‘How can we not do this?’ ”

Today Ammunition Hill is a sprawling complex with a state-of-the-art visitors center, a museum as well as the original bunkers. It is especially popular with school children, who can climb on a tank or explore the trenches.

The Russes supported the creation of a theater and a sophisticated 3-D map “City Line” table that shows how Jerusalem was divided, East from West, and lights up at different points to indicate landmarks and battle sites. They also sponsored the creation of a film that includes rare footage obtained from the Israeli air force of the battle for Ammunition Hill as well as Israeli troops hanging a flag from a section of the Temple Mount after they captured it. Soldiers who fought in the battle retrace their steps along with their children and grandchildren.

Russ noted that the site already offered a film but that it was a half-hour long — too long for most visiting schoolchildren to sit through, and less than ideal when more than one group was visiting the site.



More recently, the JNF asked the couple if they would finance renovations of the bunkers and crumbling trenches as well as new lighting.

At Ammunition Hill, Rosby noted that the site's 40 bunkers and nearly 1,000 feet of trenches, were built a century ago to protect the munitions cache of the British Mandate.

“They were falling apart and had to be strengthened from the bottom up, to be able to remain standing for another 100 years to ensure that millions of visitors can experience and learn from the heroic battle for Ammunition Hill.”

Now that pathway lighting has been installed, visitors can visit the site at night and get a feel for the challenges Israel's soldiers faced in the near pitch darkness in 1967.

Also thanks to the Russes, the sprawling field has what Rosby calls “field classrooms” — places for group members to sit and listen during a tour.

Rosby, Russ and Phillip Yankofsky, another Jewish community leader from L.A. and a Six-Day War veteran, appeared as panelists in March at JNF's inaugural San Fernando Valley Breakfast for Israel, which focused on the 50th anniversary of the reunification of Jerusalem.

Russ, who is recognized as a member of JNF's World Chairman's Council — meaning that he's made a lifetime contribution of \$1 million or more — said the American branch of the family feels a sense of duty to contribute to Ammunition Hill.

“My family in Israel fought in every war. I wanted to create something that would last and be something our children and grandchildren look at and realize we are a part of,” he said. “I also wanted to recognize the people of Israel and the families who have sacrificed so much. And finally, I wanted to honor our family who perished in the Holocaust.”

Mission accomplished: In 2005, the number of visitors to Ammunition Hill had fallen to 74,000. Last year, there were 354,000.

Russ said it has given his family “joy” to learn of the huge uptick in visitors, especially schoolchildren and soldiers, who visit Ammunition Hill on a daily basis, making it now a must-see venue on any trip to Israel.