

The Belittling Battle of the Blond “Bitche”

by Robert Burns

Captain Morton Zimmerman, a member of DIVARTY, recently told this story to family friend Robert Burns, a freelance writer from Baldwin, N.Y. who specializes in military history.

She was young, in her upper twenties, blond, and quite attractive, Captain Morton Zimmerman recalls some 58 years later. In another time and place, the aristocratic, Aryan-looking lass might have been the apple of his and any red-blooded American soldier's eye; the kind with whom he'd like to woo and flirt.

On this early spring day in 1945, however, Captain Zimmerman had no amorous affections for her. In truth, he “felt like shooting the Nazi bitch.”

He knew little about her, only that the high-browed German woman who spoke perfect English had turned him and his fellow officers down. All he wanted for himself—an S-2 officer with the 100th Division Artillery Headquarters Battery—and his comrades was a clean, warm, hospitable place to stay for a night or two.

It would be just another home in which to billet until they packed up and advanced on another German town as the war began to wind down. Unlike the French families on the West side of the Rhine who embraced the Century Division as liberators, however, this “honey” of a Hun did not have her Welcome Mat out when the officers approached her hilltop manor.

Captain Zimmerman, who had taken a long (April 1941–April 1945) and circuitous path—from Brooklyn to Vermont, Fort Jackson, Fort Sill, Fort Bragg, New York—to Marseilles, found himself in a peculiar and enraging circumstance.

He, along with 15,000 GIs of all ranks and backgrounds, had slogged his way through Southern France and into the lower Rhine; not on a guided tour, mind you, but a path that left misery, destruction, and death in its well-intentioned wake.

So when the 100th Division, on the defensive in support of the Battle of the Bulge to its north since January 1945, resumed its march in March, German cities began to fall one by one, but always at a terrible cost, even after the major engagements had ended.

“I remember lots of white flags of surrender being hung out of windows and carried by children and the aged in the streets as our columns moved through,” the native New Yorker remember.

So when this “Son of Bitche” picked out a fine brick house suitable as a stopover until the next assignment came down the pike, he expected the enemy to do what had become customary, pack up and leave or put up with the inconvenience of American boarders for a temporary repast.

This feisty Fraulein, though, put up a stink. The longer he listened to her downgrading diatribe debasing his superior officers who tried to negotiate with this daughter of the Fatherland, the hotter under his olive drab collar he became.

“I just couldn't believe what I was hearing,” the artillery spotter notes. “I became incensed, standing there and watching her carry on with an attitude that we would sully her home.”

Captain Zimmerman says his boiling point registered when he put his hand to his Army issue .45. “I wasn't going to scare her with it,” he admits. “I was simply going to shoot her.”

His rage came only a short time after he had completed a dangerous mission, one he would later be cited for and rewarded with a Bronze Star medal.

The courageous event took place on April 8, 1945. The 397th Infantry Regiment was the main striking force tasked with attacking and taking the city of Heilbronn, Germany. To strike and hold this objective, however, the division engineers needed to erect a pontoon bridge over the Neckar River. The Germans on the east side of the wide waterway were raining hellacious fire down on the engineers, though, the same kind of fire that would make crossing by other means a suicide mission of sorts. The 88s and Nebelwerfer rockets had the engineers pinned down in houses and foxholes on the west bank.

When the engineers called Division HQ about the problem, the battery commanders began looking for a volunteer to visit the shell-shocked site and figure out a solution.

Now the first rule of the Army is “never volunteer” because the assignment/mission will be unpleasant at best and suicidal at worst—the kind one gets medals for, but relatives store them away in their attic as memorials. Despite the wisdom of this maxim, and without hesitation, Captain Zimmerman said he would go on the mission. He felt it was just another assignment, one not too dissimilar than many others.

“I don’t know why, perhaps it was the training, perhaps the exuberance of youth,” the captain surmises,” but I never worried about being killed or injured. It just never crossed my mind.” That didn’t mean you could afford to be foolish and not take proper precautions, he cautions, but you did your job and moved on. “We’d be out on a survey, artillery would fall around us, you’d take cover and then go back to your assignment when it was safe.”

So the S-2 grabbed his driver and headed for the future, or futile, bridgehead site, having gotten a good description of the house where the engineers had holed up in the basement.

“As we drove down the road with the embankment in sight I could see the house where the engineers were keeping an eye on the pontoon site,” Captain Zimmerman remembers. “I had the driver stop several houses short of the observation post as artillery shells were coming in. The place I picked looked like a strong, masonry brick building that would provide good cover and wouldn’t come crashing down on the Jeep if the building was hit by artillery,” he reasoned. “I got out of the Jeep and told my driver to take cover in the lowest floor of the building and wait until I came back. I figured there was no sense in endangering the driver by taking him with me.”

He then proceeded to the OP as on-and-off shelling continued.

Based on the pattern of where the shells were falling and the information from the engineers, Captain Zimmerman developed a schematic of what was occurring.

“I determined that the firing was coming from a north-to-south direction,” he deduced. Adding factors like the strength and range of the likely weapons being used, he was able to fix on a bracket and coordinates for counter-battery fire.

Returning to his Jeep, he found the windshield shot out. His driver emerged from the storehouse, shaken by the sight of the rubble-strewn Jeep, realizing that had he stayed with the vehicle, he would have been seriously injured or killed.

Fortunately, the light truck kicked over and took the two men back to the relative safety of Division HQ. Filing his report, the division battery opened up with its 105s with devastating effect, suppressing the German batteries and allowing the engineers to finish the pontoon bridge.

Days later, the 397th, spearheading the assault, took Heilbronn with support from the 398th and 399th Infantry. All units fended off counterattacks in their respective sectors the following day.

By April 11, all units of the 100th had crossed the Neckar, albeit at a higher cost than crossing the Rhine earlier.

The overall damage, some 12,000 casualties since the Division entered combat back in November 1944, was all too fresh on the Captain’s mind when he endured the insinuations of the Bavarian-looking blond. His patience was paper-thin.

“I never met a Nazi, mind you,” the former officer muses. “No one I knew ever said they met anyone that admitted they were Nazis. They were all innocent. It was always someone else that brought the war on them and us.” Only once, he had to arrest two men who were accused of being Nazis who were turned in by some other officials. He never saw or heard of them again.

“They were not as innocent in many respects as the men we lost, or the civilians we found dead along the roadsides, the evacuees and the slaughtered livestock we passed in the fields.”

In the end, as the officer reached for his pistol, he caught hold of his deep emotions. “I realized what I was about to do. I figured if I shot her I’d be just as bad if not worse than her and the Nazis we had come to defeat.” Looking back at her point of view, Captain Zimmerman reasoned the woman was, perhaps, just another victim of the war, and she felt no remorse or responsibility to turn her home over to strangers.

“I left that house and its disposition over to my superior officers,” Captain Zimmerman notes. Like their British allies in the Northern Rhineland who made it SOP, they continued to negotiate. Their results were negative. “I don’t remember where I slept that night, but it wasn’t that house on the hill.”

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