

# “What a Beautiful Valley. Hold Your Fire!”

*Elfriede Eitel was a German citizen during WWII. After the war, she emigrated to the US. In 1994 she sent this to then-Association Secretary John Walsh.*

During a visit to my home town Stuttgart in Germany in 1992 I spent several days in the State Library doing genealogical research. I came across a town history for Unterweissach, a small town near Stuttgart where some of my ancestors lived two and three hundred years ago. While leafing through the book written by Max Zuern, I found an article about the American invasion in April 1945. Having experienced this time period myself as a teenager I just had to read the story.

The people of the Weissach valley were grateful that they had been spared from air raids and bombings during the war. This was a farming village and, unlike most city people, they still had food.

However, in April 1945 many families did not know what had happened to their fathers, husbands, sons, and brothers who had gone to war. And now there was fear. An unknown enemy had crossed the Rhine and the Neckar, and was coming nearer every day. How would the people survive the invasion of enemy troops?

The remnants of the German troops worked feverishly to put up obstacles to hold back invading soldiers. The home militia built primitive structures to stop tanks. Some people hid their valuables in haylofts, under attic roofs or buried them in gardens and fields. They were scared. What would happen to them? Would they be killed, raped, tortured?

The morning of April 20, 1945, was a radiant morning. Dewdrops sparkled like diamonds in the meadows, trees were in full bloom, the fragrance of spring hung in the air. It nearly seemed like the Lord was trying to make up with beauty for the manmade destructions of the war.

According to Max Zuern the Americans, in a surprise move, came with their tanks from Murrhardt to the heights (hills). They reached the village of Sechselberg at 5:00 AM. A vanguard of about five hundred soldiers moved towards Unterweissach. As they came over the hill the village, nestled in the valley, lay before them.

According to Mr. Zuern the commander of the vanguard, taken by the beauty of the valley, gave orders to his soldiers to hold their fire. They were able to occupy the village later in the day without having fired a shot. Mr. Zuern who, no doubt, later communicated with some of the soldiers writes, “It was the 3rd Battalion, 397th Regiment. Until this day the officer is not known. He still deserves our heartfelt thanks even today.”

Mr. Zuern continues his story with praise for the occupying troops. He wrote that the American soldiers, after entering the village, were very disciplined. The inhabitants of Unterweissach were spared from harm and the soldiers did not take their belongings. Only a few buildings were confiscated for temporary quarters.

On the evening of this memorable day Karl Trefz, a baker in Unterweissach, fired up his oven to bake bread. Amidst a general “end of the world” atmosphere he placidly declared that the people still needed bread.

After returning to my home in Arkansas I could not get the story out of my mind. I finally decided that I had to at least try to find this officer who saved the village of my ancestors from certain destruction. If he should have died I would try to find his family. I went to libraries and bookstores and poured over WWII books pertaining to the European theater.

I finally determined that the “397th Regiment” was the 397th Infantry Regiment of the 100th Division and that the 3rd Battalion of this unit did indeed come through Unterweissach.

After many futile telephone calls I reached a Mr. Parkinson at the Department of War History in Washington, D.C. Mr. Parkinson was immediately interested in my search and gave me two addresses in the Stuttgart area of people who might be able to help me with my quest.

One was the 7th Army historian and the other was the name and address of Jack Keohane, a former member of the 100th Division.

I enlisted the help of my girlfriend, Margie Seidl, in Stuttgart. She was able to contact Mr. Keohane. Soon there was a phone call from my friend.

Mr. Keohane thought the officer in question was a colonel who was killed before the war ended. This nearly broke my heart. But a few days later a letter arrived. The first information was incorrect. Included in the letter was the name and former address of a Major William S. Preston, Jr., of Burlington, Vermont.

From information I had received a number for a Mr. William Preston in Burlington. On the evening of May 29, 1993, I called the number. He turned out to be the former Major Preston, executive officer and second in command of the 3rd Battalion of the 397th Infantry Regiment. Mr. Preston was surprised, maybe even stunned, about my phone call. We talked a long time, both of us recalling war memories. Other phone calls and an exchange of letters followed.

Mr. Preston, even though acknowledging that his unit came through Unterweissach, told me that he did not remember this particular incident. It was wartime, the troops advanced swiftly from town to town, the pace was hectic and the event took place nearly fifty years ago. However, he was one of the leading officers of the battalion. After my first telephone conversation with Mr. Preston I wrote letters to Rainer Deuschle, mayor of Unterweissach, now called Weissach im Tal, and to Joerg Zuern, son of Max Zuern, the now-deceased author. Even though it could not be determined for sure who the officer was who gave the order to hold fire, they were elated to contact Mr. Preston.

Mr. Zuern recalled how he heard the story many times from his father about the American officer who saved the village from certain destruction. Mayor Deuschle wrote that through the town history the story has been passed on about the arrival of the American soldiers on April 20, 1945, and how the commander, at the sight of the valley, exclaimed "what a beautiful valley. Hold your fire." The words of mayor Deuschle are "and so it happened." The mayor also stated that thanks to this officer's decision the town today has a healthy economy, healthier than some of its neighbors, because they did not have to rebuild a destroyed town.

As a naturalized American citizen I love my adopted country and I am proud to live among people who, even in the midst of war and destruction, can still care.

The officers and enlisted men of the 3rd Battalion of the 397th Infantry Regiment are unsung heroes of our century and they still, even today, deserve the thanks of the people who will never forget this day of April 20, 1945, and of their children and grandchildren, who may otherwise never have been born.

*[Editor's Note: Elfriede Eitel's place of residence at the time she wrote this letter (1994) was Vilonia, AR, but she is no longer listed at that address. We do not know anything more about her.]*

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