

Cousins Reunited: How America's Century-Old Occupation of Germany Still Reverberates

By Viola Gienger



Why you should care

A tattered photo, an illustrated book, a DNA search — how distant cousins an ocean apart finally found each other.

The clues were in a faded, tattered black-and-white photograph that Johannes Heibel's father carried with him everywhere. Nearly 100 years after it was taken in a German village, the photo shed light on a family secret that connected Heibel to a cousin he had never known in faraway Tennessee.

In this centennial year marking the end of [World War I](#), the discovery illuminates a postwar occupation of Germany that most Americans have never heard of: A quarter-million U.S. troops, including the men in the photo carried by Heibel's father, held some 2,500 square miles of Rhineland for four years after the November 1918 armistice that ended the fighting. The American troops were deployed, along with French, Belgian and British troops in other military zones, to ensure Germany didn't resume attacks to the west if negotiations failed to reach a final peace agreement at Versailles.

The photo shows seven American doughboys, with one kneeling in front of the others. They were part of the Cooks and Mechanics section of Company F, 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment,

1st Division of the U.S. Army. The photo was taken in 1919 in the village of Bannberscheid, about 47 miles southeast of Bonn. Heibel still lives nearby.

During the occupation, U.S. Army soldiers were billeted in private homes. The military struggled, mostly unsuccessfully, to prevent “fraternization” between soldiers and local women. Among the more famous offspring of the era is the provocative late writer Charles Bukowski, born not far from Bannberscheid, in Andernach, on Aug. 16, 1920.

While many couples married, other American soldiers either didn’t know their liaisons had produced children before they were shipped back to the U.S. or didn’t own up to it, says Alexander Barnes, command historian for the Virginia National Guard and author of the illustrated book *In a Strange Land: The American Occupation of Germany 1918–1923*.

Heibel had learned his family secret — that his paternal grandfather was an American soldier — but nothing more. Two years before his father, Erwin Heibel, died in 2003, Heibel asked him about his life.

Erwin, who was born in 1920, revealed that he’d learned the identity of his birth father only when he was 23, home from the [Russian](#)

[front](#) during World War II and about to marry the woman who became Johannes’ mother. The ceremonial personal registry that German families use to record milestones had no entry for Erwin’s father. His mother, born Frieda Keil, had let him believe that her German husband, Paul Johann Heibel, was his father. Frieda was still alive, but it was her sister who broke the news to Erwin.

“That was earth-shattering for my father,” Heibel says. “He realized that many people in that little village must have known. Only he didn’t know.”

Frieda died in 1956 without revealing her American lover’s name, and Erwin tried without success in the 1950s and ’60s to find his birth father, Heibel says. In 2001, he showed Johannes a photo his aunt had given him — seven American soldiers posing in front of the home of Frieda’s parents. Frieda’s sister had said the kneeling man was Erwin’s father. But no one knew his name.



Erwin Heibel



The photo that Johannes Heibel's father carried with him everywhere.

“A lot of relationships were kept secret until these women started getting pregnant,” Barnes says. “That put the Army in a bind.” Should they punish the soldier and ship him home, or evict the woman from the occupation zone? Either way, they’d be forcibly separating a father- and mother-to-be. Letters from German town officials to the U.S. Army show efforts to track down soldiers to pay child support.

Johannes Heibel contacted Barnes when his book was published in 2011. The author scoured Army archives and contacted dozens of military historians. One noticed the men in the photo held meat cleavers, bone saws and other implements, and Barnes discovered a cooks and mechanics unit had been housed in Bannerscheid. He found a few possible names, but none panned out.

Finally, Barnes suggested Heibel get his DNA tested in hopes of finding a matching relative somewhere in the world. A month later, the results turned up a close match with David Harstin, now 58, a United Methodist pastor in Bethel Springs, Tennessee. “That was more than a wonder,” Heibel says.

The two men began to correspond. Harstin knew his maternal grandfather, Lester Denton of North Carolina, and his younger brother Paul Harding Denton, had served in the Army during World War I and after in the postwar occupation during the time Erwin would have been conceived. And Paul had been billeted in Frieda’s town. Further DNA testing confirmed it: Paul Denton was Johannes’ mysterious grandfather.



Harstin and Heibel together.

Barnes hasn't found a specific document describing the circumstances under which Paul returned to the U.S. in mid-1919, so it remains a mystery whether he knew of Frieda's pregnancy. Harstin, who served in a U.S. Army Pershing ballistic missile unit in [Germany](#) during the Cold War, said he learned Paul had been gassed during World War I and contracted tuberculosis. Records also show that Paul was captured, apparently briefly, by the enemy. After returning from Germany, Paul married, but died prematurely.

Heibel and Harstin met for the first time this month, as Harstin and his wife visited Germany to be interviewed for a German TV documentary to air later this year on descendants of the era and German-American relations since then. Heibel, 62, and his wife greeted their American visitors at the Frankfurt Airport with hugs — and a friend to help translate.

“It was immediate affection,” says Harstin. Adds Heibel, it was “as if we already knew each other forever.”

- Viola Gienger, OZY Author