

A 75-year-old photograph and a canceled bowl game bring together two sons who share a common military legacy

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Rob Zimmerman suddenly found himself with time on his hands. Doing what most of us do, he started searching the internet when the random thought to google World War II photos in hopes of finding on of his father. That search netted him a photo of his father's unit -- and a new connection with the son of one of his dad's army buddies. (Photo by Brenda Cain, cleveland.com)

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By [Brenda Cain, cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com/author/brenda-cain/)

SHAKER HEIGHTS, Ohio – For many sons of “[the Greatest Generation](#),” the stories of their father’s experiences on the [Western Front of World War II](#) have been lost to time and the grave. But earlier this year, a 75-year-old photograph brought two men -- who share an unlikely legacy -- together.

Shaker Heights resident Robert Zimmerman and Scott Goodson, who now lives in Tennessee, jokingly call one another “Company G cousins” – even though they have never met face to face.

Zimmerman had always been curious about his father's [World War II](#) service, but his dad, Philip, would never speak about what he saw during his time in Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Japan.

Goodson's dad had been more forthcoming about his experiences during WWII, and he inherited a number of mementos from his father's time in the European theater.

“Growing up, I was always interested in history – WWII in particular – and I wanted to learn from my dad because he was there. It was a way to bring that part of history alive for me,” said Zimmerman. “It was not that he got angry or would get upset when we raised the topic, but he was very slippery when it came to talking about the war. He would tell you a little snippet, and the next minute you would be talking about what's for dinner. If I brought things up again, he would simply say ‘we already talked about that.’ It was very frustrating for me.

“I didn’t know if it was because my father was a very humble man and didn’t see his service as anything special, or if he was trying to protect his wife and children from the horrible things he witnessed during the war. I suspect it was a little of both,” Zimmerman said.

When his dad died in 2000, Zimmerman felt any chance of knowing the 20-year-old boy who enlisted right after Pearl Harbor, had been lost forever.

In 2020, Zimmerman’s sister, Shelley, was serving on the Board of Directors for the [Holiday Bowl](#) in San Diego. Knowing how important the game was to her, he cleared his schedule to be able to watch the game on television, but it was [canceled when members of the UCLA team came down with COVID](#).

“Suddenly, I – literally – had nothing to do, so like many of us, I started doing random searches on the internet when a thought crossed my mind: ‘I wonder whether there were any photos of my dad’s army unit posted and if I might find a picture of him,’ so I just Googled it,” he said. “I knew it was a long shot, but what else did I have to do?”

It didn’t take long for Zimmerman to come across a photo framed with the trident patch. The inscription at the bottom showed it was Company G, 386th Infantry regiment, 97th Division.

“Because of that patch, I knew in an instant it was, definitely, his division, and the inscription on the bottom showed it was my dad’s company. It was just dumb luck that when I enlarged the photo, there he was, just 20 years old. I couldn’t believe it.”



20-year-old Philip Zimmerman was photographed with his company just before shipping out for the European theater during WWII. Zimmerman is in the second row, third from the left. (Photo by Brenda Cain, cleveland.com)

The photo had been posted by Goodson, who was hoping to find surviving members of the company or their children. Zimmerman quickly sent an email, then forgot about it. It took less than a week for Goodson to contact him.

During that first conversation, “we found all of these amazing similarities our fathers shared. It was just unreal.”

Ted Goodson had grown up in Parma at the same time Philip Zimmerman was being raised in Glenville. When Pearl Harbor was bombed in December 1941, “those boys knew there was only one place in their future, the military, and that is what they did.”

Both Zimmerman’s and Goodson’s military entry test scores in math were high, so they were assigned to the [Army Specialized Training Program \(ASTP\)](#) and sent to [Iowa State University](#) to study trades that were important to the war effort. Both Zimmerman and Goodson were assigned to the engineering program.

After the [Battle of the Bulge](#), the need for manpower at the front was so great that soldiers in the ASTP were reassigned. Company G was diverted to the European

theater – where both men were trained as machine gunners.

“We concluded that our fathers, not only had to know each other, they had to know each other as well anyone in the entire company. I mean, what are the chances.” Zimmerman asked. “Neither spoke of the other to their families. Our families have never connected and yet, somehow, their sons have come together in this shared legacy.”

Even though the photo had been posted for two years, Zimmerman was the only one to answer Goodson’s plea to connect.

“He was very forthcoming in that he was getting older, and only had daughters who were just not that interested in the photo and Scott wanted to share it with

a surviving member of the company, or a family member. I was very lucky that he gifted it to me, and now it is one of my most cherished possessions,” said Zimmerman.

While Zimmerman and Goodson have not become “best friends by any stretch,” they do connect on Memorial Day and Veterans Day as a way to keep their shared legacy alive and tell stories of their fathers’ lives -- before and after the war.

“Not knowing much about my dad’s military service was a big hole in our family’s narrative. That time shaped the man we knew and loved. Thanks to Scott, we now have been able to fill in a little more of that gap,” Zimmerman said. “Our fathers weren’t war

heroes by any stretch. They were just ‘a man doing his job – no more, no less’ -- to help protect the freedoms we all enjoy today.”

In fact, Philip Zimmerman -- who earned the [Bronze Star](#), among several other medals -- was so quiet about his wartime exploits, he never even picked up his medals. Near the end of his dad’s life, Robert was able to get them for his dad with the help of then Ohio Senator John Glenn.



Philip Zimmerman was a highly decorated serviceman -- even earning the Bronze Star. His son, Robert, was able to get his father's medals years later with the help of Ohio Senator John Glenn. (photo by Brenda Cain, cleveland.com)

“It has really motivated me to remind people that in WWII, our country came together by necessity to fight a real foe that was a threat to our way of life,” Robert Zimmerman said. “Whatever differences people had at that time they were put aside for the good of all of us.

“There are very few of them (WWII veterans) left, which is why I think it’s important for people to learn about -- and remember – the very real sacrifices that these very brave men and women of my dad’s era made to preserve the freedom we, too often, take for granted.

“Few people can relate to the story of two sons of soldiers coming together after having lived our whole lives without ever knowing the bond we have. But we

made this connection, and it allows us to tell their story – to share it with another generation and remind people of what we have had and what we can have again.”



photo courtesy Robert Zimmerman