War without end: For my father, WW2 was never over

by Barbara Wagner Dueholm in the May 13, 2015 issue

Hank Wagner with Rosemary Eberle in 1943. Image courtesy of the author.

In the summer of 1998, my parents and I took a road trip from Wisconsin to Georgia to visit the newly opened National Prisoner of War Museum in Andersonville. When my siblings learned I'd offered to do this, their collective reaction was that I needed to get my head examined. My father had been shot out of the sky twice in World War II; he escaped a German POW camp and then did clandestine work in Nazi-occupied Europe. As compelling as this history was, it rested uneasily alongside our lived experience with a man tormented by his memories and his conscience.

To many, especially his brothers in arms, he was hail-fellow-well-met. He was the earthy bard of the local Eagles Club and a founding member of his ex-POW chapter in eastern Wisconsin. He drove veterans to appointments at the Milwaukee VA Hospital and was welcomed and respected in the honor guard at veterans' funerals too numerous to mention.

Our family's inner circle, however, knew him differently. To us, he was mercurial—loud, brash, and exacting but also often silent and sullen. His anger could approach the edge of violence; he was the terror of our household. He rigidly demanded our obedience to his authority while scorning to offer his own to anyone, including a long string of employers.

According to my mother, the man who returned to her in 1945 was completely different from the one she had known. What happened to produce this Jekyll and Hyde in our midst?

Henry Wagner, commonly known as Hank, enlisted in August 1941. He was already "romancing" my mother, Rosemary, as he put it, but he knew a war was coming, and he wanted to be able to choose his branch: the Army Air Forces, predecessor to the U.S. Air Force. Besides, Depression-era Kiel, Wisconsin, had not much to offer a parentless young man, even one with a high school diploma.

Rosemary was just 17 at the time, too young for marriage. But to keep the flames of affection burning, she started writing Hank letters and sending photos; he responded in kind. It was a letter-writing time, and they wrote many.

Hank describes December 7 as the day the roof fell in. He was sent off from his Mississippi airfield for the eventual destination of the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. On a mission in May 1943, his plane was shot down, and he and two other surviving crew members parachuted into the North Pacific. He sustained multiple injuries, including a concussion that left him unconscious for three days.

After six months of convalescence, Hank was offered an assignment as a gunnery instructor on a base in Utah. He declined, believing he wasn't cut out to be an instructor—and assuming that some other safe, stateside assignment would emerge. Instead he found himself in Ardmore, Oklahoma, training as an aerial gunner on B-17s. They flew in tight formation with dozens of other planes. Many air crews crashed in training. Those that survived were ultimately headed for the United Kingdom. In a touching display of hope over experience, Hank and Rosemary

married in Ardmore in December 1943. In February, their correspondence resumed when Hank headed overseas to join the Mighty Eighth Air Force at an American air base in southern England.

On his first mission, flying over Germany but not yet to the target in Berlin, Hank's plane took a hit, and an engine burst into flame. The pilot and copilot dropped out of formation and went into a steep dive, from 23,500 feet to 3,000. "It blew out the fire," Hank told me, "but we were all alone." They barely made it back to England, flying low until they reached a landing strip just beyond the white cliffs of Dover. They had lost another engine along the way; their B-17 was scrap. "Everything was expendable," Hank explained, a sad wartime truth that applied to men as well as equipment.

Mission after mission followed. In May 1944 Hank's entire flight crew was transferred to the 15th Air Force, based in Italy. They flew missions in Romania, France, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. "We hit a target on the edge of Switzerland," Hank said. "You could actually see it. It would have been very easy to glide into Switzerland and sit out the war there." Hank was eager to finish his required 50 missions—the number had steadily increased from the original 25—and to rotate back stateside. So when his usual crew was on a rest rotation, he and the copilot signed up to fly as replacements with a different crew on July 16, 1944.

It was Hank's 46th mission. He never completed it. After dropping bombs on the target in Vienna, his plane took a direct flak hit. Some crew members went down with the plane; Hank was among those who escaped by parachute. "I landed on a Luftwaffe air base," he said, "which should be against the law in any war." A German soldier pointed a gun at his head as soon as he hit the ground. "He didn't know many words of English but said, 'For you, the war is over.'"

The crew members were taken by train to Dulag Luft, a central interrogation center where the staff spoke fluent English. "I guess I lipped off to the wrong guy," Hank said, "and I got sent to Berlin, where I stayed for another ten days." The interrogators made constant threats. "The rest of the guys either kept their mouths shut or cooperated," Hank explained, "and they got sent to Stalag Luft IV two weeks ahead of me." When he finally appeared at the POW camp, located in present-day Poland, one of them asked where the hell he'd been. "I took a side trip to Berlin," he replied, four armed Nazi escorts at his side. "The Krauts wanted me to take some pictures."

Our drive south to Andersonville was uneventful. When Hank was in good spirits he was a garrulous man, rarely running out of things to chat about. Rosemary crocheted quietly in the backseat, coughing whenever I pushed the car above the speed limit. Our third day out, we arrived at the museum.

The National POW Museum appears barracks-like and ominous, in contrast to its serene rural setting. That day, the reception hall was empty. Tapping in Hank's name and service number at the computer kiosk yielded a "no records" response. Hank shrugged it off. (I learned later that his service record was among those lost in a 1973 fire at a records depository in St. Louis.) The exhibit space was festooned with keepsakes and memorabilia, many of them from World War II. Hank walked silently through, stopping here and there to read an exhibit description.

At the end of one aisle was a wall with a quote from a captured German soldier: "After serving on the eastern front, being a prisoner of war in the US was like taking the rest cure." That stopped Hank in his tracks; he spun around and marched out of the building. Taking deep pulls on a cigarette, he barked: "They got treated like goddamned houseguests, and we were over there being starved and shot!" Not true, but close enough; German POWs sent to the United States were used mainly on agricultural and similar manual work details. Not a few ended up in Wisconsin, where German was still spoken by a wide swath of the population. Prisoners were housed humanely, and even during wartime there was always enough to eat.

But Hank already knew all that. Why had this particular inscription set him off?

At Stalag Luft IV in early August 1944, Hank witnessed about 200 American prisoners running toward the compound. They had just arrived at a nearby train station, and "they were forced at bayonet point by German guards to run at top speed to the camp," said Hank.

> Hauptman Pickard [a captain later charged with war crimes but never prosecuted] was riding back and forth along the lines shouting at the guards from his motorbike, telling them to keep the men running and threatening to shoot the guards if they didn't keep prodding the men on at full speed. One of them dropped to the ground; I could see it easily from where I was standing. When he fell, a German guard prodded him with his bayonet in the back, in his buttocks, and in his legs. He crawled for a short way, and then two American prisoners picked him up a short distance outside the gate and carried him right

into the hospital. He had 62 bayonet wounds, and there were about 12 other men who were also mistreated in this same way on the run.

Hank was coaxed back into the museum, but before long he again left the building, not to return. I suggested a drive through the original Civil War prison camp, with its monuments and plaques; he wouldn't even have to leave the car. This was soon aborted as well. Off we went to see the avenue of flags, only for Hank to again bellow, "Get me the hell out of here!"

His reaction should not have taken me by surprise. Several years earlier he wanted to see the movie *Memphis Belle*, in which a WWII B-17 crew flies its last mission before being rotated back to the States. Partway through the film, amid graphic images of the flight crew in extreme circumstances, Hank got up and walked out. For him, the film was over.

So Andersonville quickly receded in our rearview mirror. The first night of the return trip found Hank and me at a hotel bar in Knoxville, after a mostly silent dinner with Rosemary. "If you knew the things I've done, you wouldn't have a thing to do with me," he said. "You would not cross the street to spit on me." There was an emotional cancer eating away at him, and it wasn't the POW experience—which, wrenching as it was, lasted less than three months. What had irreparably wounded Hank's psyche was what he did after escaping.

Having grown up in rural eastern Wisconsin and attended German primary school, Hank read, wrote, and spoke the language fluently. In October 1944, he was approached by an escape committee inside the camp. The committee had already talked to a French flier named Gilbert Guitlmain, who was a friend of Hank's. Hank had a day or so to think it over.

A horse-drawn cart carried the garbage out of the camp on a regular schedule. The driver always parked his wagon near the kitchen, out of sight of the guard towers, and then came in for a cup of coffee. It was the perfect opportunity for Hank and Gilbert—Hank called him Frenchy—to make their way to the wagon and lie on their backs, carefully placing flattened Red Cross boxes over themselves. Then other POWs piled the garbage on top of them.

The cart driver came back to take the load away. Hank was convinced the man was in on the escape—the British had been in POW camps since 1940, and Hank believed they had their ways of engaging some of the local population. "Away we went," said

Hank,

> Right through the gate. Nobody checked it because he had done this for God knows how many times. We got to the dump. It was the type of wagon used for grain or sand: there was a lever that was pulled and the bottom drops out, like a bomb bay. There was 16 feet between the wheels, so you just rolled. This driver must have been well instructed. He didn't look back; he just kept right on going. By the time he turned his team around to go back for another load, we were in the brush, and he never saw us. I just hoped the old fellow lived.

Hank was 24 years old, an American GI in civilian clothes, at large in enemy territory.

"If I'd realized what being at large meant, I wouldn't have agreed to it," Hank confessed to me in Knoxville. What it meant was conducting clandestine activities in Nazi-occupied Europe, a very dangerous proposition—but perhaps made to sound less so if one knew the enemy's language and could blend in. Hank's assignment was to blow up buildings, ammunition stores, supply depots, and train bridges—and not get caught. Perhaps this would be preferable to the misery of the POW camp. In any case, Hank never explained why he agreed to the escape, only that he forever regretted that he had.

Hank and Frenchy's first night at large was spent in a barn, he said. The farmer came early in the morning to milk his cows, accompanied by his dog. Knowing they'd be discovered, Hank used his knife to take both of their lives. Then he and Frenchy fled. In hindsight, Hank believed he should have tried to talk his way out of that barn instead. But in the moment, in a panic, he did not.

They met up with other at-large personnel. According to Hank, "Frenchy and I got indoctrinated." The French dropped them a piece of radio equipment, with more drops to follow.

> Every night we got a radio code which Frenchy understood; we got a drop one evening of explosives, and there were caps with it. You put it on a train track and the pressure caps would blow the engine and tracks all to hell. There were ammunition dumps pinpointed to us, and you work at night and get around that dump. There are usually guards around, and if you couldn't lure them away you did away with them one way or another. Then you blow up the dump, but you better get the hell out of there because they'll start looking for you. Eventually

> we got to most of the sites. We raised general hell.

In February 1945, Hank, Frenchy, and another man were sent to meet a group of POWs on a forced march from Stalag Luft IV. “It took us four or five nights to get there,” said Hank. “We sat still during the daytime. We were to find this column, operate on the fringes of it, see what they needed. If it got too bad, they would pull a raid in the area.” Eventually the orders were changed, and they were sent toward Berlin; then another change found them heading toward Austria.

By this late stage of the war, Germany was enlisting boys barely into their teens. Hank and Frenchy came upon such a group of teenagers bathing themselves in a small pond, their German army tunics and rifles placed neatly on the shore. For those boys, the war was instantly over.

Hank’s breaking point, he said in Knoxville, came in April. He and Frenchy had planted explosives on a train bridge and retreated a half kilometer or so to watch their handiwork. As the train crossed the bridge and the charges blew, Hank saw that the overturned cars had Red Cross markings on them. Ashes from his wobbling cigarette tumbled onto our table at the bar.

I reminded him that the Nazis did this all the time, that they marked their trains with Red Cross symbols so they wouldn’t be bombed or strafed. “Dad,” I said, “they were *Nazis*!” No, he said, this was an actual Red Cross train. “How could you know that?” I asked. “You were ordered to blow it up, and you did”—an inadvertent and agonizing reminder of just how like the enemy he had become.

A farmer told Hank and Frenchy that the Americans were at the Elbe River, 45 kilometers away. They headed that way, soon meeting up with others they knew.

> We picked up a guy from St. Louis, too. He didn’t make the Elbe River. We traveled for a day or two, and we sat down in the woods at night. We heard tanks off in the distance but didn’t know whose they were. Either the Americans or the British started lobbing shells over the woods where we were. It didn’t take but a minute, and the Germans started firing back. I guess this was about as scared as I have ever been in my life. During the night someone said, I hope they don’t cut the fuses short on those, because they’ll drop in the woods right here. It didn’t happen, fortunately.

The group approached the British lines near the Elbe; Hank went out to meet them, weapon in hand. “Somebody spotted me and immediately jumped in a Jeep and came toward me,” he said. “It was a frightening feeling, looking at the business end of a 50 caliber.” It took a while for the British to verify their identity. When they did,

> they gave us something to eat and passed us on seven or eight miles to a Yank outfit. We again went through the identification process, and when they finally decided that we were Americans, we were treated with the best. You would not believe how their demeanor changed! We got food, we got cigarettes; they couldn’t do enough for us.

That afternoon, Hank and the others were flown to England. They were covered with lice, and they went through DDT disinfectant. The next day they landed in Washington, D.C., where the Counter Intelligence Corps questioned them. “They wanted our life stories,” said Hank, “our routes, names of German guards—anything and everything we could remember. It got pretty hectic, a goddammit situation. There wasn’t anything they could do to us, but they threatened.” He was ordered to “take to his grave” the information he disclosed about his period at large. Needless to say, he disobeyed.

Hank’s brief and bloody time at large haunted him the rest of his life. “You don’t have to scratch a man very hard,” he told me in Knoxville, “to expose the animal underneath.” His experience haunted those who lived with him as well.

Rosemary experienced a traumatic journey of her own. She was notified in August 1944 that Hank’s plane had been shot down and by September that he was at Stalag Luft IV. She received his personal effects in December, along with the War Department’s notification that he was now missing in action. In May she was told that her husband had been liberated on April 16; a subsequent telegram said he was being returned and would contact her. What she found was a man who weighed 97 pounds and had a hard time sleeping or keeping food down. She said the soft-spoken but often devilish young man she knew had disappeared.

Hank’s nightmares lessened over the years, but they never truly left him. Physical illness, depression, rage, weeks or months of total silence—with the exception of alcoholism, he suffered it all. As Nicholas Shakespeare has eloquently written, the survivors pay with their conscience.

Hank mellowed a bit in old age, seeming to enjoy the company of his grandchildren more than he ever allowed himself to do with his own children. But sadly, he never attained his own amazing grace. He was never a religious man, but even in the very last days of his life he seemed to retain just enough faith to fear damnation—yet not enough to imagine himself forgiven. Hank had an unhealed wound, left by the enormity of the death and destruction that he witnessed—and caused. For Hank, and for all of us who lived with him, the war was never, ever over.

Upon returning to Wisconsin in the summer of 1945, one of the first things Hank did was to ask Rosemary for all the letters he had written her, a correspondence so voluminous she kept it in a large dress box. He took the box out to the gravel-covered driveway, covered it in gasoline, and lit it on fire.