

Michael Wagner - Tribute

Mick lived a full and active life and in recognition of that we have a number of tributes today covering the different aspects of his life. But I'd like to start with a few words from Mick's nephew James, who was unable to be here today. He said this:

We have lost a very special person, the head of our wider family, a brave and resourceful soldier and a fine man. Mickie was irrepressible and, until almost the end, so independent. Sparkling at his 90th party, able to walk down a steep chine to the sea in Bournemouth only 5 years ago, and mentally alert as ever when Mila and I last visited Holton in August 2015. I am humbled by his achievements and so glad that his death was peaceful.

I'm going to begin our tributes by looking back on his early years and – in doing so – I am indebted to the memories of his family and to Mick himself, who documented his life in some autobiographical notes.

Mick was born in London on 2nd November 1917. His parents were Albert and Violet and he had an elder brother, Alfred, and a younger sister Catherine, known as Joie. Mick's father, Albert, was Managing Director of the English Branch of Thomas Edison's Electrical Company and the family lived in some comfort in the recently established Hampstead Garden Suburb. Mick recalled having a nanny who came from Mauritius and a white Russian governess called Claudine.

After attending kindergarten Mick started his formal schooling at the nearby Henrietta Barnet school, and it was here that he first met Nan Wilson, who was a contemporary of his sister Joie and who was later to become his wife.

Mick was a bright child who did well at school. After a couple of years at Henrietta Barnet he went to Junior School at University College School and then to Senior School in Frognal in Hampstead. Here he took up tennis and represented the school in a national match. He won the first round, but in the second came up against one "F. Perry". Mick lost the match six-love, six-love.

Mick was preparing for his Schools Certificate Examination, confident that he would pass and qualify for university entrance, when it was decided that he and his brother Alfred should continue their education in Switzerland. They transferred to a school at Rhenania where they joined 100 other boys who came from all corners of the globe. All lessons were conducted in German and skiing was one of the main forms of outdoor activity. Thus began a passion that was to last for the rest of Mick's life.

In his notes Mick recounts two memorable events from his Swiss schooldays – a trip to Rome to see the Pope opening Golden Doors in a very special ceremony, and a vast Nazi Party Rally in Baden Baden that the young Mick found both sinister and frightening.

After two years Mick and Alfred returned to England, with a wealth of experiences, but no formal qualifications. They travelled with their father on a business trip to America, which involved a trip to Niagra Falls, and the sights of New York City, Washington and Virginia. On their return Mick, who was by now 16, started work at Thomas Edison and began learning the business from the bottom up. He then went on to become an articled clerk to a firm of Chartered Accountants where he worked from 1936 to 1939. He found the work dull but his three years with the company were enlivened by jobs abroad for foreign clients. He and a colleague, John Davies, stayed in good hotels with all expenses paid and became connoisseurs of good food and wine.

Outside of work Mick continued to play tennis with a group of young people who included Nan Wilson. He was heartbroken when Nan's family moved to Bristol in 1937.

As war became inevitable Mick joined the territorial army as a sapper in the 32nd Company of the 33rd Royal Engineer Battalion. There were annual training camps and periods when the company was "embodied" into the regular army and then stood down again when fears of immediate hostilities receded. Ten days before the outbreak of war the company was called up for real, and Mick became a serving member of his Majesty's Armed Forces.

We're now going to listen to the Italian National Anthem, after which Mick's grandson Mark will talk about Mick's war years and his long-standing connection with Italy.

Mark's tribute

I am going to tell you a little of the story of Granddaddy's time in Italy. My love of Italy has been inspired by the stories of his time there.

Granddaddy was fighting in North Africa in the Western Desert when his company was captured by Rommel's Afrika Korps on 30 January 1942. He was 24 years old. Eventually he was transferred to an Italian prisoner of war camp at Padula, a disused monastery in Southern Italy.

Helen and I visited Padula when we went to Italy in 2015. It is such a beautiful place. We stood in the cloisters while we read Granddaddy's description in his memoirs. From the cloisters, all around you can see the white tops of the mountains in the distance, just as it would have been when he was there. And we imagined him sleeping in the rooms above the cloisters, eating in the beautiful monk's refectory and walking round the cloisters for exercise. In spite of the cold in the winter and the lack of food he had good memories of Padula and his time there.

Then in July 1943 the Allies invaded Sicily and the prisoners were rapidly moved to very different camp near Bologna. After the Italian armistice in September it was clear that the Germans were going to

take over the camp and probably move the prisoners to Germany. Granddaddy and two friends planned an escape by concealing themselves for two days in the roof space of their block in the camp. They managed to slip out one night, under the wire and forced a door in the wall.

The three travelled down Italy, mostly by night, on a 250 mile trek south towards the Allied lines. Winter weather in the Appenines and illness forced them to stop and stay at the village of Esanatoglia, east of Perugia, where they spent five months of a bitterly cold winter hidden in a small room next to the chapel of San Cataldo which is perched on a crag high above the village.

We saw San Cataldo when we went out to Italy for Ali and Stu's wedding. We walked up the rocky path which Granddaddy describes in his account, past the statues of the apostles, to the chapel at the top with stunning views across the valley and back towards the mountains.

While there they were brought food, clothes and medicines by the local villagers, at a great risk to themselves of reprisals from the German forces. Eventually in April 1944 the heavy winter snow cleared and they set off again heading to the coast, where they and others were picked up by an allied landing craft in May 1944 and taken by sea 70 miles down the coast until they landed behind the allied lines.

After the war my grandparents went back to Italy to thank the villagers who had provided such help, and they visited regularly over the years. They always loved Italy, the people, the food, the music and the countryside.

I was fortunate to be able to accompany Granddaddy on one of the visits he made with the Monte San Martino Trust which connects veterans of the Second World War, and their descendants, with the Italian villages and people who helped escapees in Italy. We followed the Tenna Valley Escape Line, which was the route he took to the coast, and met the villagers and laid wreathes in honour of those who gave their lives in the war.

My grandfather's story of his time in Italy is such a remarkable one and he made enduring friendships through it with the men he escaped with and with the people who helped him. I am so proud of what he did. It's an incredible story of an amazing Granddad.

Mick's daughter Margie is now going to talk about his years in Zambia.

Margie's tribute

THE ZAMBIAN YEARS

It was by chance that early in 1946, while awaiting demobilisation, that Mick happened to see an invitation to serving officers to apply for posts in the Colonial Service.

And so barely had the war ended than he set off on another great adventure to Northern Rhodesia, (now Zambia.)

First he and Nan Wilson, his childhood sweetheart from Hampstead days, were married in Bristol, in September 1946, and then they sailed from Southampton on a cold day in December.

A couple of months later, after the sea voyage to Cape Town and three thousand miles by train and dirt roads they finally reached Isoka, a remote outstation near the Tanganyikan border. They were to spend the next 22 years in Zambia, working, raising their three children and forming many and lasting friendships. They soon grew to love the country, its people, and the climate.

For Mick the responsibilities of those early days were daunting.

Soon he was responsible for an area the size of Wales with very few passable roads, no telephones, a limited and irregular postal system, and many different local languages. He dealt with legal cases, schooling, and agricultural and medical issues. All the time working in cooperation with the Paramount Chiefs of the Native Reserves and Trust Lands, and maintaining good relations with them. This involved regular village touring, on foot, by bicycle or by canoe. Always accompanied by ten or more African carriers who would transport all the necessary equipment and set up camp at night, often for a week or more.

He threw himself into all the aspects of this work while at the same time building their first home from scratch, even baking the bricks.

Other challenges faced Mick and Nan, the remoteness, the absence of medical facilities, the shortage of other European company, the lack of running water or electricity, the various health risks, and the great distance from their family and friends back home. Every week long letters were written by "snail mail", collected by truck once a month to make the long journey back to England, and each month eagerly awaited post arrived.

But for all that it was a contented time, peaceful and safe, during which Bobbie, Margie and Trish were born and grew up, and much loved pets joined the household: Rikki, a mongoose who was supposed to deal with the snakes and a giant of a Rhodesian ridgeback who saw off marauding leopards, and Betsy the gentlest of bull mastiffs, and dozens of guinea pigs.

The family moved frequently: Isoka was followed by Kawambwa, Mporokosa, Abercorn, and Luanshya before a more settled time in Lusaka where Mick worked in the Secretariat, finally as under Secretary in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

And every 3 years there were the 'long leaves'. Everything was packed up and stored and the family set off for home for 6 months: long journeys by road, rail and sea, or in 1957, by air, flying in unpressurised propellor aircraft and stopping for three or four overnight stays on the long way north up Africa. Several times we spent some of the leave time in Switzerland, skiing had always been one of Mick's great loves and through him we younger generations have all learnt to love it too.

Until the family moved to Abercorn in 1956 there were no schools for Bob and Margie. And so Nan ran a "school for 2", complete with curriculum, timetables, bells and breaks. She did this with the help of a remote correspondence course from London which arrived in instalments every couple of months. Once the children were all at school Nan took up regular medical work, spending years in the African Medical Service, working in a Leporosity Clinic and a Maternity Hospital. Our faithful cook, Jonathan, was diagnosed by Nan with early leporosity when she noticed how he could hold very hot plates without any apparent pain. She treated him and he was cured.

In the remote outstations, Mick and Nan needed to be pretty self-sufficient. There were no shops, and everything ordered from Lusaka took weeks to arrive, and from England months. Mick always enjoyed working with his hands and was skilled at making things for the home and family. Most of our early toys were homemade, as were some of our clothes (he was the needle-person of the family). He made a sailing dinghy, from African hardwood, using a kit ordered from England, which we sailed on the lake at Abercorn. And in Luanshya for Trish he built a brick and tiled Wendy house in the garden, with a bedroom upstairs. He was delighted to hear from a visiting Zambian that 30 years later it was still standing.

In 1964 Northern Rhodesia became independent Zambia. For four years Mick and Nan stayed on to help with the transition to independence. When they finally left in 1968 it was with happy memories and with a great affection for the country and its people. For us three children it had been a marvellously free and unconventional childhood in a warm, safe and beautiful country.

By an amazing coincidence, Mick's grandson Mark is being posted this year by the Department for International Development to take charge of their office in Zambia. He told Mick about this just before Christmas. Mick was delighted.

On returning home from Zambia Mick and Nan lived first in Suffolk and then, for nearly fifty years, in Somerset in North Cheriton and Holton. Mick worked for a boat builder in Milborne Port, for Tyndall Managers Limited in Bristol and for Crittall windows. He also made and restored furniture in his

spare time. He spent his retirement years playing golf, gardening and served for some years on the Parish Council.

During this time Mick and Nan became grandparents to Benjie, Alison, Joanna, Mark, Sarah, Claire, Michael, Andrew and Kathryn who all used to visit them in Somerset. We are now going to hear some memories of those times, firstly from his grandson Michael.

Michael's tribute

"My memories often seem to me to act like photographs. Often, of course, my memories are confused by having seen an actual photograph. If you had asked me, until recently, if I remembered Shandy, Grandmummy and Granddaddy's dog, I would have said yes, clearly. But of course what I remember is a photograph of Dad, with the dog that had been acquired, temporarily, in Zambia and then brought back at great expense of time and money as no-one could bear to leave him in Zambia.

And other images play like a slideshow when I think of Holton Lodge and Rose Cottage. Granddaddy and Grandmummy meeting us in the dark as we explode out of the car after a 10 hour drive, always happy to see us and ready to give us warm toast and jam, or porridge. Granddaddy's cheeks - always apparently clean shaven yet always rough as sandpaper, somehow. A very clear image of an outline of a rabbit drawn on a cardboard box, as I was allowed to shoot the wee garden gun at it. Very clear as I always missed. A freeze-frame montage of a football sailing up from the lawn and through the study window - Granddaddy forgave us but we had to help clear up and make good. And a landscape shot of a particular hole at the golf course, a downhill par 3 that should've been an easy reach but which has my ball flying sharp right out of shot while Granddaddy's is flying low but quite straight down towards the green.

And in my head the garden at Rose Cottage is always a picture postcard of ordered colour. It was always immaculate, and I know that Granddaddy had lots of help to keep it that way from Annette and others. But it was a working garden too, and it was always lovely to eat the produce from Holton Lodge and then Rose Cottage. And I got my interest in woodwork from somewhere - unfortunately not the skill, but the interest - and I have a dark and dusty image of the stables across the road full of furniture and tools.

Of course there was so much else that I could talk about that I know second-hand. Dad's, and now my, love of skiing came from Granddaddy, who used to ski with Ian Eldridge every year. I have blacked out the image of crashing into him on a holiday in Italy. His work in Bristol that he would travel to on a Honda 50 - luckily we didn't inherit his enjoyment of motorbikes. His ability with crosswords (again, aided and abetted by Annette). His travels to

America, Europe and North Africa - I think it's fair to say the whole family have definitely inherited a love of other cultures and far-off places.

We will all have our own images of Granddaddy and we will each have our own favourite and most memorable. And from today there will be another - of his family and friends, from Holton and from further away, who gathered to celebrate his life and remember him in our own way and collectively."

Mick's grandson Andrew has written this tribute, which he has asked me to read.

My grandfather was known for many things:

World War 2 soldier

POW escapee

Commissioner in Africa

Golfer

Gardener

But to me, and maybe to his other grandchildren, he was the man who owned a very large house that contained all sorts of exotic and mysterious looking memorabilia. The drive down to the house took a long time, and culminated in a scary drive along little country roads, usually in the dark.

Other memories that involve that house were:

Times, like when we were allowed to make miniature gardens out of any plants we could find.

The back staircase, which I was convinced was there for spies to escape down.

The Easter egg hunts in the garden that took way too long because of its size.

Playing frisbee in the garden, and often losing it in the big pond that was just behind the wall

And Mum and Dad having a trip to London one weekend, and all us kids receiving a present when they returned.

There was also the summer day that we all went to one of his friend's houses, just a five minute walk away, to swim for the afternoon.

Then the move happened, and the big house was replaced by a slightly smaller one, although it still had the same mysterious artefacts and objects.

New memories were also created however, including a larder that was full of jams and chutneys that had usually been made several

years before. I remember seeing one of these jars in the last year or so, which was dated sometime in the 80s. There were also the buffet lunches that were created, and which included some of those jams and chutneys, but also various meats, cheeses and other foods.

There is a piece of prose that I once heard in a movie, the name of which I have forgotten, but it reminds me of Granddaddy, and also of the times when him and Grandmummy were together:

Love is always patient and kind, it is never jealous, love is never boastful or conceited, it is never rude or selfish, it does not take offence, and is not resentful.

Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes.

Love does not come to an end

I didn't get to see him very often, maybe once or twice a year, but I will never forget the visits that we did have, because they created some very good memories for me, and they will never be forgotten.