



¹⁵¹**156**
PARACHUTE BATTALION
ASSOCIATION

151/156 Parachute Battalion Association

Newsletter 2 | January 2021



Dear members,

2020 will long live in our minds with Coronavirus affecting all of us and it continues to be the biggest crisis since World War II. We did, however, manage to hold a successful 79th Reunion Commemoration at Saltby Airfield and at St. Mary's Church in Melton Mowbray last October, albeit with reduced numbers. We can now look forward to the 80th anniversary of the 151/156 Parachute Battalion this autumn which we are already in the planning stages of and, thanks to our members, already have new material that we will be able to share with you.

We have sadly lost our last veteran, Captain Michael Wenner, who passed away on Tuesday, 21st November 2020. He was a brilliant scholar, paratrooper, commando and diplomat but, above all things, he was a compassionate human being. Although a little deaf as many veterans of the 156 were, his gentle nature and warm smile endeared him to all.

The following is Michael's life story which we have been able to put together with the kind help of Raven and Martin Wenner. I think it is such a shame that we have to lose someone before we learn of all their wonderful deeds. Some men excel in one field, some in another, but Michael was one of those rare people who was brilliant in many areas; he was a very special man.

Enjoy this Newsletter and keep safe everyone!



151

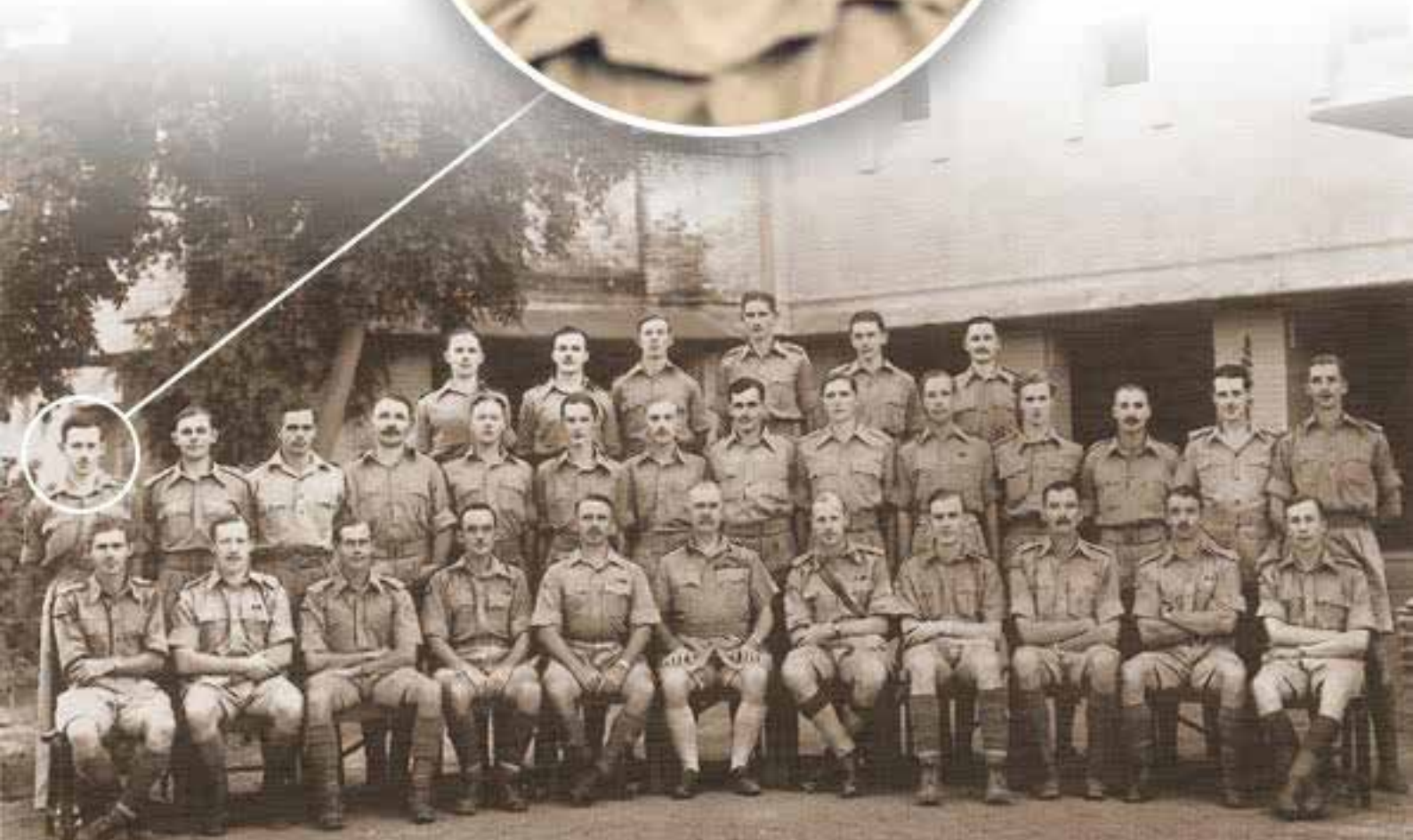
Rosie Anderson
rosieanderson@gmail.com
0208 788 0999

John O'Reilly
john.oreilly@thorotonpublishing.com
01949 851354

Will Stark
will@156para.co.uk
01620 481472

Captain Michael Alfred Wenner:
Paratrooper, Commando and Diplomat
17 March 1921 – 21 November 2020

Airborne Forces Museum



Lieutenant Michael Wenner (circled) whilst serving with the 151 Parachute Battalion in India in October 1942

Michael Alfred Wenner died on 21st November 2020. In 1941, Michael was serving with the Lancashire Fusiliers in India when, as a 20-year-old lieutenant, he volunteered to join the newly formed 151 Parachute Battalion. Based in New Delhi, the 151 was commanded by the flamboyant Lieutenant Colonel Martin Lindsay who, in 1940, served as Staff Officer to Carton de Wiart VC in the Norwegian Campaign. He subsequently briefed Clement Attlee on this campaign, which was instrumental in bringing down the Chamberlain government.

Michael recalled that Lindsay acquired a string of horses for his officers. Michael chose a 16-hand chestnut gelding with a kind eye that he called Percy. They hunted jackal and raced at the Delhi course in their specially made silks.



151/156 Battalion Archive

Lindsay's Lancers – Officers of 151 Parachute Battalion at the start of the Open Race at Delhi Racetrack, 8th February 1942.

Training intensified using the two serviceable pre-war twin-engine Valencia aircraft converted for parachute jumping with a crudely cut exit hole in the floor, carrying a stick of 10. Parachuting at that time was perilous and 151 lost six men over an eight-week period when their chutes failed to open, as well as a variety of other serious injuries. One of Michael's fellow officers, Captain John Waddy, fractured his skull when he collided with the metal tip on the end of a static line as he dropped through the aperture.

In 1942 rioting in India was widespread – particularly in Delhi – and it was the 151, together with a battalion of Gurkhas, who were charged with controlling the critical



Vickers Valencia with open cockpit, carried a stick of 10 men.

situation which, had it continued, would have necessitated the commitment of many British troops to remain in India, thus preventing them from stopping the Japanese advance from Burma into India.

Ultimately it was a series of that brought to an end battalion, the first of summer of 1941 when tibia of one leg. At the battalion was shipped to Palestine and was there re-badged the 156 Parachute Battalion. From 15 March 1943 it was commanded by a new CO who had been on the staff of General 'Boy' Browning, Lieutenant Colonel Sir Richard des Voeux (previously from the Grenadier Guards). Michael had an excellent regard for 'Dickie' who improved both morale and standards all round, preparing the battalion well for its subsequent invasion of Italy as part of 1st Airborne Division.



parachute training accidents Michael's time with the which was in the late he broke his fibula and end of 1942, Michael's

Whilst in Palestine, however, a low altitude night drop from Dakota aircraft took place at around 300 feet (far too low) over the Haron Valley where some of the men dropped on a Kibbutz, crashing through roof tiles and landing in dung heaps. Milkmaids on their early rounds could be heard screaming, believing the Germans were landing. The Jewish settlers, supposedly under attack, rushed to the armoury and it was only a last minute intervention by their well-travelled Rabbi that prevented loss of life. This low drop resulted in many casualties, including Michael who broke the same leg again. Later told by medical staff that he would not be able to make another parachute jump, it forced him to change unit, initially joining 2nd Parachute Brigade in Naples as a Staff Officer with the rank of Captain.



Wenner Family

Lieutenant Michael Wenner photographed centre in crouched position with a stick of 10 men from 151 Parachute Battalion ready to board the Valencia aircraft in Delhi, Summer 1942. Michael kept this photograph in his wallet which was only discovered after his death.

Not happy with a desk job he took a drop in rank to lieutenant to join the 9 (Scottish) Commando, subsequently seeing action at the latter end of the Italian Campaign. Michael was disappointed not to join his friends in the 156 Parachute Battalion when they were dropped near Arnhem in September 1944. He was devastated to hear about the loss of many of his friends including the much-loved Lieutenant Colonel Sir Richard des Voeux; he said it was like being hit in the solar plexus and that he felt dazed for some time.

In February 1945 Michael was made Intelligence Officer of 9 Commando and restored to his former rank of Captain. His account of his unit's action in Operation Roast in north-east Italy during the Spring 1945 offensive is as follows, which has been taken from his book, *So It Was*, published in 1993.

“We prepared for the final onslaught of the German Armies, strongly fortified behind the ‘Gothic Line’ running aslant the northerly neck of Italy. A narrow strip of 10 miles of land separates the eastern part to the vast swamp-like Lake Comacchio from the Adriatic. Our (2nd) Commando Brigade, comprising four Commandos and support forces, was to capture the spit by attacking across the lake as well as from below it and from the sea. In this way we hoped the German armour and reserves would be drawn



Captain Michael Wenner, aged 22, during his time with the 151/156 Parachute Battalion in Cairo, summer 1943.

away from the centre and towards the Adriatic coast. If so, our manoeuvre would enable our more powerful 8th Army to penetrate thus-weakened Po Valley defences west of the lake and drive through the so-called Argent Gap.

“I had carefully studied air photos and had even been flown over the area. But what I did not detect, nor had we been informed of, was the extreme shallowness of the lake at that time of the year. Massive, amphibian, tracked, troop-carrying vehicles oddly called Fantails were supposed to ferry 9 Commando over several miles of water towards the enemy’s western flank some half-way up the spit. On the night of the attack, we waited interminably in the dark while the Fantails revved their engines to a scream and juddered. But they just couldn’t move in the mud; so, we spent precious night hours awaiting other transportation. The commanders consulted. Since our little show was in effect to trigger the whole 8th Army final offensive, they decided to go ahead with the operation; with the help this time of a fleet of small, open, outboard motor-powered ‘storm’ boats. Even these after a while kept sticking in the weeds and ooze and we had repeatedly to jump thigh-deep into the slime and push.

“But from the air photos, I had alerted the Colonel to a series of concrete emplacements within the area of our intended landing. The German defences had, we hoped, been pulverised by air and artillery bombardment which had thundered for hours before we left the shore. It was close to dawn as we approached our designated landing area. Happily, only one small gun or mortar seemed to be able to fire in our direction and its little shells kept plopping ineffectually into the water as we waded in. The German defences had nearly all been planned against an attack by land, no-one thinking anything serious could get across the swamp. Most of them had been silenced by the bombardment. So, as far as the landing went, we were in luck.

“Our foe was ethnically mixed. Russians pressed to serve with the Wehrmacht surrendered readily. Other auxiliaries were also easily rounded up and I believe our total POW score the first day approached 200. There were die-hard SS troops leading them, however, many of whom fought bitterly before withdrawing; and we lost around a dozen officers and men killed, including my close friend Mike Starling. I was with him for a few minutes as he died; his stomach shattered by machine-gun bullets and his face ashen. I promised to write to his young wife. I did so and she came to visit me in Oxford after the war. The Germans, too, did not all leave or surrender. I still have a German helmet I picked up in a concrete emplacement there that day. It has a bullet hole through the left temple. The Commandos advancing from the south met with more trouble than we did. A member of one of the Royal Marine units was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. So was the genial Danish SBS (Special Boat Squadron) Major, Andy Lassen, killed during mopping-up raids round Camacchio. He had been with us in Greece, and, more than anyone I have known, deserved the title ‘fearless’.

“The feint across Commacchio succeeded, but another operation along the shore and the Fossa Marina bridge and sluice gates west of the lake was needed to help open the way through Argenta. This was to facilitate penetration in strength by other 8th Army forces, including a Polish division, through the Argenta and Bologna sectors and beyond.

“Once again, I had incredible luck, or perhaps God was watching specially over us that early morning. The Commando set off westwards across the lake in 20 or more of the big ‘Fantail’ amphibian, tank-like transports. This time they worked. An IO’s map-reading is expected to be irreproachable and mine had been shown in the past to be good. There had been no time for air photographs, but it anyway fell to me to direct the fleet to the designated landing places. Dawn was breaking as we came close, landed safely, and fanned out unopposed except for a little mortar fire. The various troops dug in and gradually moved on towards farm buildings dominating the approaches to the vital bridge.

“We were being ‘stonked’ rather more by various kinds of mortars; but not too intensively, and from Commando HQ’s position we could look down at the Queen’s Battalion who were landing maybe a mile further north up the beach. Their Fantails came under heavy fire of all kinds. Many were set on fire and exploded, and their casualties must have been very serious. I saw later that they had come in at a configuration of shoreline, which on the map was very similar to where we had landed. Right under a Wehrmacht Weapons School manned by experts, this was, in retrospect, exactly where I believe No. 9 Commando would have gone if I had read my map unerringly. Had I done so, I would not be typing these notes.

“The Commando, pipers from each Troop playing as their objectives were gained one after the other – but at considerable cost – fought its way by nightfall to positions varying from quite close, to some hundreds of yards from the bridge and its wide canal. Despite valiant attempts to get nearer still, we were pinned down there under fixed line and continuous mortar fire, and took a good many casualties. My dear friend George Bisset, the Sapper (Engineer) officer, very bravely got to the bridge with two men and was in the course of defusing it when, with a shattering explosion, most of it blew. George had, in fact, succeeded in disarming one span of the bridge and this remained intact all the way to the other side, but was not wide enough to take a vehicle. It did, however, later prove helpful to the Guards Armoured Brigade – our successors there – in getting over.

“Meanwhile, the Germans had brought up a Tiger tank, perhaps the most devastating ground weapon of World War II, at the other end of the bridge. With the resources available to us at that moment, it would have been suicidal to try to force a crossing,



Captain Michael Wenner wearing his 9 (Scottish) Commando uniform photographed in 1945.

or even get closer. Mortar bomb clusters continued to fall sporadically, and bursts of machine-gun fire chattered whenever the Germans on the other side of the canal thought they saw movement our way. Somewhere nearer our side of the canal ... a wounded German or Italian cried out in pain most of the night. The impulse was to go out and do something for him. But it was an impulse that had to be curbed. When you have been shot at all day and seen men killed, whatever the nightmare of your feelings, you have a responsibility to your own people, as well as to yourself, not to court almost certain extinction in defiance of orders.

“The mist descended and blanketed all movement throughout the ensuing day. I was sent out with two men to reconnoitre whether any Germans were still on our side of the canal, not my life’s most agreeable experience. We patrolled very gingerly up to, and near the bank for an hour or more and overheard Germans talking on the other side, the fog magnifying sound. I was expecting to meet an enemy patrol or be shot at any moment. I found the building where Harry Kither had died, but no trace of George Bisset – later reported killed – nor any enemy. On approaching our own positions, perhaps because of the 48-hour strain without sleep, we all forgot the password; but even in the mist were fortunately recognised as we approached. Four Troop tried to get assault boats up to launching positions from the canal bank but sustained too many casualties to justify a full-scale attack of that kind. One officer, testing the canal to see if it could be waded across, came back with mud up to his chest.

“... The Commando had suffered badly in this only partly successful battle. My friend Peter Bolton’s section of 24 men, the heaviest hit, was down to seven active soldiers. On being relieved by the Guards, we were withdrawn some distance back. I chose a large haystack in the open to rest in while awaiting transport back to Marina di Ravenna, a small resort on the Adriatic close to Ravenna. I had always heard haystacks were dry and comfortable. This one was ice cold and sopping wet. But I slept like a baby in it for hours, and afterward for another 24 hours in our billet from the moment we got back to it.”

After the war Michael took up his Oxford scholarship at Oriel College (won pre-war at Stoneyhurst School), where he studied modern languages and won a full blue for boxing. He entered HM Diplomatic Service in 1947, and his first posting was as 3rd Secretary in Stockholm where he met his first wife, Gunilla, with whom he had four sons: Miles, Andrew, Christopher and Martin; she died in 1986. Advancing through various posts around the world, his last appointment was as British Ambassador to El Salvador from 1965 to 1969, where he founded Academia Británica Cuscatleca. Taking early retirement from the Diplomatic Service, he went to live in Houston, Texas. He had various business interests, including acting as Commercial Advisor to the new



Michael Wenner pictured on the right in St. Mary's Church, Melton Mowbray at his last Reunion, October 2019. Standing is Royal Signaller John Jeffries who was attached to 4th Parachute Brigade at Arnhem.

Consulate General of Switzerland from 1974 to 1979, and Wenner Communications, specialising in translation services. He married his second wife, Holly (Raven) Adrienne Johnson, in 1990. For the last 12 years of his life, he and Raven lived in Cheshire. The Imperial War Museum interviewed him for a living history which was recorded, and he donated his hobnailed paratrooper boots that he had worn around Laythams, the family hill farm, for decades – the laces, and some items in the attic, can be found mended with still-strong parachute cord from World War II.

Michael's hobbies included fly fishing, old maps, choral singing, volunteer teaching and elocution. He never lost his love for his former unit and for the last 12 years or so attended every 151/156 Parachute Battalion Reunion at its former wartime base in Melton Mowbray.

Farewell to 156 Parachute Battalion's Last Veteran

Ten miles north-east of Melton Mowbray lies Saltby Airfield, tucked away half a mile down an unmade road. Close to the runway is a monument constructed from the hardest Leicestershire stone. It commemorates the men of the 156, 11th and 2nd Parachute Battalions, together with the 1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade who flew from Saltby and lost their lives at Arnhem in September 1944. It also remembers the United States Army Air Force 314th Troop Carrier Group based here and who died during World War II.

At first light on the morning of Michael Wenner's funeral on Tuesday, 8 December the Union Flag was lowered to half-mast in his memory. He was the last surviving veteran of the 156 and he will be dearly missed.

Michael Alfred Wenner 17 March 1921 – 21 November 2020
He leaves widow Raven and his four sons Miles, Andrew, Christopher and Martin



At first light on the morning of Michael's funeral, the Union flag was lowered to half mast at the Saltby Airfield Monument. Michael was the last surviving member of the Battalion and was one of the first to join the 151 Battalion in India in 1941.

Eulogy given by Martin Wenner, youngest of Michael's four sons

Yes, Dad was probably never happier than in, it seems to me, the army during WW2, and latterly in his last thirty-plus years – the Raven years – the last 12 of which were next door to us. Personally this late proximity was a gift because it was the first time in my life I got to know him better (such had been the separation of a largely peripatetic lifetsyle); and particularly as his style was an undemonstrative one, always more of an Alec Guinness than a Richard Burton in inclination; and to understand some of the gifts I had received from him over the years, mostly I think by osmosis.

Gifts such as...

A love of music – perhaps due to his virtuoso violinist French mother Simone, we all learned instruments, and to me he introduced the piano and (his love) Chopin – amongst the rare times he spoke of his playing he told me he had been a rather decent pianist giving recitals at 7 years old ... only he'd gone downhill ever since!

Creativity...

Music and theatre and football and writing and travel and sailing and languages and riding and skiing and flying (to name but a few activities) in tandem with a can-do attitude, meant that we all were enriched with an incredibly broad spectrum of active adventure, artistic endeavour and outward-looking interest.

Generosity of spirit, Acceptance, Lack of judgement-alism ...

He never criticized my dangerous choice of career ... – perhaps because his cousins were a theatrical family of some note, and his own acting leanings would be evident when reading out aloud to us, often in a range of broad accents (the comic poems of Hilaire Belloc were particular favourites); but doubtless also because he was outward-looking, multi-lingual, well-travelled, and an admirer of diverse aspects of any country's culture. At 6 years old, when the house was empty, I would secretly play, utterly bemused but fascinated, the rich array of records he'd brought back, often from various far-flung countries visited on his 1960s' diplomatic trips – I found Austrian folk songs, Anna Russell, Flanders & Swann, Arthur Askey, extraordinary calypsos by The Mighty Sparrow from the Caribbean, and bizarre community dance songs from Jamaica among the treasure trove. All things which appealed to his quiet but rich sense of humour; a bit like, in another way, Texas cowboy "Kikker" country dancing, of which he was very fond (and introduced me to on my first visit to Houston).

Positive mindedness and love of the genuine and genuinely excellent ...

An active desire to take action to make the world a better place – as Ambassador to El Salvador he worked tirelessly to initiate and grow British trade, develop exchanges and



Michael Hurst

Michael's wife and family are unspeakably grateful for the tribute paid by the RHQ PARA Recruiting Team pallbearers, a colour guard, and bugler at his Requiem Mass at St Margaret's Church, New Moston, Manchester, on 8 December 2020; a solemn farewell to not just a family man but one of their own.



Michael Hurst



RHQ Para Regt

Eulogy by Michael's third son Christopher

God Speed Dad

There are war stories my dad told reluctantly and very rarely which never leave me. How his elite commando unit wading ashore armed to the teeth to take on the Nazis were stopped by thousands of celebrating Greek women with hugs and kisses, whilst the Nazis blew up parts of Athens behind them. How his parachute brigade launched a daring night attack on a Canadian airfield in the Mediterranean and stormed an island and scaled the cliffs to take a base that had been abandoned by the Germans the day before. In my dad's account, war was a comedy of errors, a horror you could only look at askance.

As a young man he may have felt some excitement when he went to war, like his father did and so many of his friends, out of duty, but he had no taste for fanfare. He went with regret. In the army he chose the most dangerous paths, the paratroopers, the commandos, and yet when these choices led him to miss the worst of the killing because his elite units were held in reserve, he celebrated with the quiet humour of one who saw irony in every great enterprise.

Simple humanity was his true master.

My dad was a public servant. He had a sense of responsibility to do good things, to make things better, and measured his bosses against this benchmark. He was sceptical of orators. He served the British state with loyalty and quiet pride, and then the Swiss state too conscious of his family roots. But unhesitatingly and without rhetoric he served core Christian values as masters of every state.

As a dad he led by example. Building dry stone walls, trying wind power and micro-spraying the rushes at Laythams Farm, looking to his sons to prove themselves as he had always sought to do in the army, in the world of diplomacy, and then commerce, pushing the frontiers of development and education in El Salvador and trying new ideas in the unfamiliar world of Texas, where he met the woman he loved for the last four decades of his long and fruitful life.

Dear Raven: I am proud to be your Michael's son, my children are proud to have had a grandad thanks in no small part to you and to the love you showed him through the years when caring became ever harder. I have no words except thank you. And we love you, and will always love you. Thank you Raven, and thank you Debbie and Martin, for making his long life possible, and through all the isolation imposed by his hearing and mobility, making him happy. We will miss you, Dad, forever.



(Back row) Niall Cherry from The Arnhem 1944 Fellowship and Martin Wenner. (Front row) Raven Wenner and Leslie and Michael Hurst representing the 151/156 Parachute Battalion Association.

Extra stories from Raven Wenner

Alfred Emil Wenner came home from World War I with machine gun bullets lodged in his leg from the Battle of Passchendaele. Soon after, he married a French woman, a notable violinist, later first violinist of the Hallé Orchestra. This lady, Simone Roussel, came from a French military family; her father had been an officer serving in Morocco, and his father had been an officer during the Franco-Prussian War.

Their elder son Michael was born 17 March 1921. Simone's parents moved from Lyons to Macclesfield to be with their only daughter, as she was often alone – her husband was the travelling sales representative of the Wenner Partners textile firm in Manchester. Michael's first language, not surprisingly, was French, not English. When Michael was a small boy, his French great-grandfather and great-grand mother came to visit his youthful grandfather and grandmother in the wilds of deepest Cheshire, and their dismay at the English weather and conversations seemingly always of the military and politics made a great impression on him. Michael himself became a great grandfather 5 years ago, so had the singular privilege of seeing seven generations of his family.

Michael, because his mother and her family were devout Catholics, was educated at Stonyhurst College, Lancashire. Shortly before World War II began, he was sent to Switzerland on a couple of summer camps to stay with cousins so that he could learn Swiss German. He noted the tension at the local school, the booted pro-Hitler youth sitting in a block on one side of the classroom. He sat with the others, and made a good fishing friend of the local pastor's son. Returning to England fluent in German, Michael joined the OTC at Stonyhurst where he applied to Oxford University to complete his studies. The advent of war in 1939, however, meant that, like the rest of his class, he volunteered instead for the Lancashire Fusiliers, was assigned to India, and working solo with a guide along parts of the Afghan border; mapped the mountain passes (now in Pakistan) for tank warfare. Bored with inaction, he and others of his regiment volunteered for the new 151 Parachute Battalion. He carried only two photos in his wallet: of his wife, Raven, and a faded black-and-white snapshot of him in his 'stick' in the 151. Apparently, he carried this photo from 1942 until his death, aged 99, in late Autumn of 2020.

He broke his leg twice in training which troubled him in later life, later requiring one, then two knee replacements; though he walked with a slight limp from middle age, he stayed fit with swimming and yoga. Though he was eager to qualify to jump again, he was permanently grounded in desk duty.

Chafing for action, he took a cut in rank to join the Scottish Commando Regiment, depleted to the point that they would accept an Englishman (albeit a Northerner). So he changed his maroon beret for the green with black hackle (both of these would rest on his coffin on the day of his funeral, 8 December 2020) and fought through Italy and then Greece. At the war's end in 1945, he was demobilised with the rank of Captain, (he had resisted promotion both with the 151/156 and the Scottish Commando) and took up the Oxford scholarship he'd won 6 years previously at Stonyhurst. So he entered Oriel College to study Modern Languages; heard lectures by C. S. Lewis; became a life member of the Oxford Union; performed in Molière plays; and took up boxing to stay warm in Britain's coldest winter in living memory. Keeping warm eventually won him a full blue for Oxford at boxing.

He took the exam for the Foreign Service, and entered in 1947. Asked what he would have done if he hadn't been a diplomat, Michael said he would have loved to have been an archaeologist, maintaining a keen amateur interest in it all his life. At his first posting in Stockholm, Michael met and married Gunilla Cecilia Ståhle (her wedding dress cunningly stitched from his remnant parachute silk by her mother) by whom he would have four sons. After serving as HM Ambassador to El Salvador (where in 1970 he

singlehandedly founded the Academia Británica Cuscatleca, the life accomplishment of which he was most proud) Michael took early retirement from his Foreign Service career to become a businessman in Houston Texas. There he was well positioned as agent for a British firm manufacturing agricultural spraying equipment for South America.

Later he was recruited as Commercial Advisor to the new Swiss Consulate General in Houston, where his many languages and skill as an economist made him an informal mentor to many smaller consular staff of other countries; for this, he was made an honorary life member of the Houston Consular Corps, representing over 60 countries.

Michael was by this time a widower, Gunilla having died in 1986. He married Texan Holly (Raven) Johnson in 1990. He would remain with the Swiss Consulate until mandatory retirement at 70, which the Houston City Council resolved was 'Michael Wenner Day' to honour his many quiet good offices to promote foreign trade and goodwill. At heart an honourable public servant to the last.

In retirement, Michael and Raven for 10 years ran a home-office proof-reading, copy-editing, and ghost-writing business. Michael was sometimes asked by Houston's Baker Institute to translate sensitive documents from various languages into English. Each year, the Houston Shakespeare Society would recruit Michael as MC and be chief judge of a panel of distinguished academics and actors at the Southwestern area High School Shakespeare recitation competition. One year he presided over a memorably 'heated' discussion involving both Vanessa and Corin Redgrave, and three heads of University English Departments each of whom backed different candidates for the first place prize: a week's trip to England to attend a production at the Globe Theatre. Michael said it took all his diplomatic skills to reach consensus, but he was afterward much praised by all for his skills as mediator.

Michael and Raven sometimes enjoyed productions at Houston's Alley Theatre, which for a long while was in a 'rough' part of town. When Michael was 80, one night after an enjoyable play, they strolled down the pavement towards the car park when a menacing, hulking figure crossed the street to walk up to confront them – was it a thug out to steal wallets? Raven felt Michael 'shift gears' and without breaking his limping stride, swing his stick up into both hands. She made ready to slip out of her high heels and use them as stilettos if the man attacked. The thug and the former commando and his wife continued on a collision course at walking speed. Raven said that though they had not exchanged a word, Michael was 'radiating quiet menace'. The large man began to slow down, and abruptly stepped off the pavement to walk back across the street. Afterward, when he was driving them home Michael commented, with slight regret: 'We could have taken him'.



Michael Wenner, aged 90, explaining his wartime experiences to an enthusiastic class at the local Broadbottom Church of England School, Hyde, Cheshire.

Wenner Family



Wenner Family

During this time, Michael was a volunteer teacher (elocution and public speaking) at a Catholic Home School cultural outreach programme, wrote his memoirs *So It Was* and a book of children's stories, *Telephone Tales*, and translated from German into English a harrowing 19th-century account of one of his ancestors' adventures, 'Kidnapped by Brigands'. Michael had a great interest in Texas history and love for Texas folkways, and he and Raven enjoyed country dancing every other Saturday night. They kept a succession of short-haired guinea pigs as pets, and Michael liked to coax them into 'jumping' a pencil hurdle for a nubbin of tomato and let them swim with him in the back-garden swimming pool, towelling them dry carefully before returning them to their enclosure.

Every year of their marriage, they spent a month visiting Michael's sons in England and Scotland, but it was getting harder to travel, so in 2008 Michael and Raven made the difficult decision to leave their Texas home to return to England, to be near Michael's sons and their families and Laythams, the Yorkshire farm Michael had bought in 1969 as a family gathering place. (Thanks to government bureaucratic tinkering, in 1974 the farm astonishingly found itself relocated in Lancashire.) And so they lived in a house beside that of Michael's youngest son in Cheshire, not that far from where Michael had been born in Macclesfield.

Every year since returning from Houston (and two years previously) Michael and Raven attended the Reunions of the 151/156 Parachute Battalion. Michael was moved beyond words when in 2015 he was invited to unveil the plaque dedicated to the memory of 156 Battalion at Staveley Lodge, Melton Mowbray, where the regiment was billeted prior to leaving on 18 September 1944 on Operation Market Garden.

In mid-September 2020 Michael and Raven and their cat went to their 'dacha' at Laythams, the family farm, to enjoy the late autumn weather; after a couple of weeks, Michael awoke at midnight slightly delirious, telling Raven 'to make sure to tip the porter to have the trunk ready to disembark, as the train connection at Peterborough was tight; so be ready to move quickly'. He was under the impression they were on the train for the annual 151/156 Parachute Battalion Reunion dinner at Melton Mowbray. He had quietly developed pneumonia (not Covid) in one lung and after the local doctor visited, he had to be taken by ambulance (waving gallantly to wife, holding their cat, as the ambulance door closed) to a local hospital, where, cruelly, he was not permitted visits by his wife and sons until he was near death. The final time they were allowed to visit, he was serenely glad to see them, and his last request was that his wife put his wristwatch on his arm – he always liked to know what time it was when he awoke, to be ready for whatever would come.



Michael and Raven cheerfully set off from their local railway station at Broadbottom, Cheshire for his 156 Parachute Battalion Reunion at Melton Mowbray.



IN MEMORY OF
THE OFFICERS AND MEN
OF 156 BATTALION.
THE PARACHUTE REGIMENT
WHO LEFT THEIR STATION IN THIS
PARISH ON SEPTEMBER 18th 1944.
TO FLY TO ARNHEM. AND THERE DIED
IN THE CAUSE OF FREEDOM.
"O VALIANT HEARTS."

Pte D LANG
Pte GW LAYT
Cpl W LEACH
Pte HW LEWIN
Sgt O LILLY
LCpl E LYNAS
Pte D MALCOL
Pte J MANNING
Pte SK MARRIC
CSMI N MCKIN
Pte A MUNRO
Pte E OLIVER
Major MS PAGE
Sgt ED PARKER
Pte F PARKIN
Pte HJ PHILPOTTS
Pte W POLLOCK
Pte H PURTON
Major EV RITSON
Pte FW RHODES
Sgt TPW ROGERS
Pte GA SAUNDERS

*Michael and Raven Wenner attending the
151/156 Parachute Battalion Association
Reunion at St. Mary's Church, Melton
Mowbray in October 2018.*

John O'Reilly

Written by John O'Reilly and Raven Wenner.
Eulogies by Martin Wenner and Christopher Wenner respectively.
Extract from Michael Wenner's book *So It Was* by kind permission
of the Wenner Family.
Design and layout by Will Stark.
Edited by Rosie Anderson.
www.156para.co.uk

