

Under The Wire

The Escape and the Life of Dr. Frank Nagy



Painting by Dr. Frank Nagy

Introduction

Every so often you meet someone whose life quietly carries the weight of history, courage, sacrifice, and grace all at once. In the mountains of Prescott, over coffee and the shared joy of motorcycles and unhurried conversation, I have had the rare privilege of coming to know such a man.

Dr. Frank Nagy is, to anyone who encounters him, a gentle and deeply present physician, a devoted husband to his beloved Peggy, and a man whose reflections on life are born not from theory but from experience. At eighty-four he moves with the energy and brightness of someone decades younger. His eyes are alert, his humor quick, his presence warm, curious, and fully engaged.

But there is a moment that tells you everything you need to know about him.

If a young mother walks into the room carrying a baby, you will lose Frank mid-sentence. Whatever he is saying simply stops. His entire attention turns toward that child with a kind of reverence that is impossible to miss. He will rise from the table, drawn as if by gravity itself, and before long he is in delighted conversation with the mother, asking about the birth, the child, the name, the first weeks of life. The babies, without hesitation, seem to recognize him. They study his face, reach toward him, settle easily in his presence.

To watch this is to understand his whole life in a single scene.

This is the physician who spent decades bringing children safely into the world. This is the boy whose own life once hung in the balance in the darkness at a mined border. This is the man who chose, again and again, to orient himself toward life rather than fear. His attraction to the beauty of a mother and child is not casual. It is a lifelong devotion to new beginnings.

And what marks you most deeply, if you spend any time with him at all, is the way he loves his wife.

Frank speaks of Peggy with the joy of a young man newly in love. There is a freshness in it, an unmistakable delight, a daily gratitude that cannot be manufactured. After everything he has seen and survived, the center of his life is not his accomplishments, not his rank, not even his remarkable story. It is the simple and radiant fact that he and Peggy walk through this world together. Their love carries the settled strength of decades and the sparkle of something newly discovered. To witness it is to be reminded that a life lived well does not grow hardened. It grows tender.

What strikes you first is not the history he carries but the lightness with which he carries it.

When we first met, I knew him only as the thoughtful man across the table, a riding companion, a brilliant clinician, a gracious friend. What I did not yet understand was that this same man had once crawled beneath live wires and across a mined border in the dead of night to escape Soviet occupied Hungary in 1956.

He does not wear that past as a burden. He has transformed it into purpose.

After surviving oppression and beginning again in a new land, he went on to attend medical school, to become a physician, and eventually to serve in the United States Army. He rose to the rank of Colonel and served as a combat surgeon commanding a combat support hospital during Desert Storm. He did not serve for prestige. He served because he believed in giving back to the country that had given his family freedom, safety, and a future.

That is Frank.

This is not simply a story of survival. It is the story of what a human life can become when freedom is met with discipline, service, love, and purpose. The trauma is real, but it is not the defining note. What defines him is the long, steady decision to live well, to remain open, to remain hopeful, to choose gratitude over bitterness and engagement over withdrawal.

Resilience, practiced over a lifetime, has not merely preserved him. It has made him luminous.

To sit with him today in the Arizona high country, listening to his laughter, watching him light up at the sight of a newborn, and hearing the warmth in his voice when he says Peggy's name, you would never guess the boy who once lay motionless in a ditch while soldiers passed within arm's reach.

And that is precisely the point.

Here, in his own words, is the story of that journey and the life that followed.

The Uprising and the Threat

On October 23, 1956, the Hungarian uprising began in Budapest, led by students and workers who dared to hope that their nation might once again determine its own future. For a few brief days Soviet control seemed to loosen, and the air was filled with a kind of cautious exhilaration. That hope was extinguished when Soviet forces returned in overwhelming strength. The sound of tanks replaced the sound of celebration. Arrests began immediately. People disappeared without explanation. Those who had spoken publicly were marked.



My parents were both teachers and my mother had stood before crowds and spoken openly at patriotic rallies. The warning came quietly but with absolute clarity that her name was on a list for arrest. My father had already survived the catastrophe of Stalingrad and had long ago resolved that he would never again submit his family to a system that crushed human dignity so completely. There was no dramatic discussion and no time for hesitation. The decision was made that we would leave.

Two Days of Silence

Preparation took place in complete secrecy. For two days we remained inside our home and spoke very little. Important documents were sewn into the linings of our winter coats. Birth certificates, school records, identification papers, and what little national currency we possessed were hidden in the clothing that would travel with us. Each of these small actions

carried the weight of finality because we understood that we were not preparing for a journey but for the possibility of never returning.

On the night of our departure, we dressed in layers for warmth and for concealment and darkened our faces with charcoal so that we could not easily be seen. We slipped out through back streets and gardens and moved toward the edge of town, joining the silent flow of others who were also trying to reach the Austrian border. No one spoke above a whisper. The darkness was broken only by the distant sounds of vehicles and the occasional sweep of light.

Waiting for the Guide

We avoided the main road and waited in the open fields for the young guide who had been arranged to lead us to a dry creek bed and from there to a place where the border defenses could be crossed. He never came. His parents had forbidden him to take the risk. There were too many people moving westward, too many patrols, and too many Russian troops in the area. The anxious murmur of the crowd rose and fell around us, and it became clear that we were now dependent on our own judgment.

Then the alarms began and the waiting ended.

Separation

Searchlights mounted on trucks swept across the road and soldiers shouted orders that sent waves of panic through the crowd. In the confusion I became separated from my family. I ran blindly and threw myself into a roadside ditch where an overhang of long grass provided a thin cover. From that position I could see only the lower legs of the soldiers as they moved past me. Their boots, the wheels of the trucks, and the glare of the light were so close that it seemed impossible that I would not be discovered. I lay without moving until the noise receded and the darkness returned.

When I finally crawled out and stood up there was no one there. In that moment I was certain that my family had been captured. I began to walk slowly back toward the town, stopping repeatedly and turning to look into the blackness toward the west. Even at that age something in me resisted the idea of surrender. I stopped, turned around, and began to walk again toward the direction of the border.

Finding One Another

In the darkness we found each other again. My father listened carefully to the night and located the gully that led toward the frontier. As we moved into it two university students came running up behind us and asked if we knew the way. My father turned to me and allowed me to

give them the direction and they ran ahead, waving their thanks as they disappeared into the night.

Before we continued my father gathered us together and gave instructions that were simple and absolute. We were to walk in single file and keep some distance between us. We were to speak only in whispers and never call out. If there was danger we were to drop immediately to the ground and move off the path to take cover. If we were separated again each of us was to continue alone toward Austria and from there make our way to Canada where my uncle lived in Montreal. These were not abstract possibilities but practical rules for survival and we accepted them without question.

The Final Mile

It was close to eleven o'clock when we reached the open ground that marked the last mile. The dry wash ended in a plowed field and beyond it we could see the curved concrete posts, the wires, and the dark shape of a watchtower. The clouds moved away and the stars appeared, allowing my father to orient himself by the Big Dipper and the North Star.

He went ahead alone on his hands and knees, feeling his way forward through the minefield that he had studied previously. Antipersonnel mines lay scattered across the ground, some fully exposed and others partially embedded in the soil. With extraordinary patience he pushed several of them aside and lifted the lowest strands of wire with forked sticks so that we could crawl beneath. In places the wire had already been cut by those who had passed before us. Every movement required complete concentration because a single mistake would have ended everything.

Flares

At the moment when we were most exposed panic broke out among a larger group nearby and a woman who had insisted on joining the escape began to scream.



Almost immediately parachute flares rose into the sky from a nearby military position and the entire field was flooded with a harsh white light. Searchlights began to move and the sound of soldiers shouting carried across the ground.

We lay flat beneath the wire without moving while the mines lay within reach of our hands. When the flares burned out and the darkness returned, we began to crawl forward again, only to be caught in the beam of a powerful flashlight and ordered to halt. My father lunged toward the light and struck it and once again we froze

in place while more flares rose above us. A patrol passed so close that we could hear their voices clearly and yet they did not find us. Eventually the light faded and the silence returned.

Austria

We moved forward again and followed the fence until a building emerged from the darkness. A white enameled sign in German confirmed that we had reached the Austrian border post. A door opened and a small dog rushed toward us barking. A man called it back and my mother answered him in German. The border guard identified himself and brought us inside where about sixty other refugees were already gathered.



In the morning the villagers came and took us into their homes and for the first time in many days we experienced the simple safety of being welcomed.

The Long Journey West

A few days later we were transferred with hundreds of others to a former sanatorium where representatives of various countries were arranging immigration. Because my father's brother had lived in Montreal since the 1920s, we chose Canada. We traveled by train to Trieste, crossed the Mediterranean by ship, passed through Gibraltar, and then endured the long winter crossing of the Atlantic. We landed in Halifax in February of 1957 and continued by train to Montreal.



Within a few months I was speaking fluent English and entered school with Canadian, British, American, and French-Canadian students. I

completed my studies early and went on to McGill University and later to its medical school.

A Life of Service

The freedom that had been purchased at such risk became the foundation for a life of work and service. My medical career developed in pediatrics and obstetrics and gradually moved toward an integrative understanding of healing that at the time was not widely practiced. I later served in the United States Army, rising to the rank of colonel and commanding a combat



support hospital during Desert Storm. In every setting the memory of that night remained a quiet guide, a reminder of the responsibility that comes with freedom.

The deepest and most enduring part of my life has been my marriage to my beloved Peggy. Together we built a home in the mountains of Prescott where the pace of life allows for reflection and gratitude.

Coffee, Motorcycles, and the Wonder of a Life Lived Well

Now, when we meet for coffee after riding our motorcycles through the Arizona hills, the conversation often turns to the wonder of life, the cost of perseverance, and the gift of having been allowed to live in freedom. The frightened boy in the ditch, the refugee crossing the ocean, the physician, the soldier, the husband, and the friend are not separate lives but one continuous story.

Freedom made that life possible. Discipline, service, and love gave it its meaning.

Final Words

When I ride home through the mountains after our time together, I often think about the improbable continuity of a single human life. It is the same life that once lay motionless in a roadside ditch while soldiers passed within arm's reach, the same life that crossed an ocean in winter toward a language not yet spoken, the same young man studying late into the night in Montreal with a determination born not of ambition but of gratitude. It is the same steady pair of hands that would go on to welcome thousands of children safely into the world, the same physician who would one day serve in the heat and urgency of a combat support hospital in Desert Storm, giving back to the country that had first given him refuge and possibility.

And now it is the same man who sits across the table from me in a small café in Prescott, whose voice still softens when he speaks Peggy's name, who rises without hesitation when a mother enters the room carrying a newborn child, drawn again and again toward the fragile miracle of new life. In those moments the entire arc of his story becomes visible, not as history recalled but as love still actively choosing its direction.

What moves me most is not what he survived, but what he chose to become. He did not grow guarded or cynical. He did not live as a man defined by what had been done to him. Instead, he became a man defined by what he has given — by service, by loyalty, by tenderness, by a gratitude that has never dimmed. In an age that often mistakes hardness for strength and visibility for significance, his life stands as a quiet and steady corrective. The measure of it is found in the warmth he carries, in the delight that still reaches his eyes, in the way a baby settles in his presence, in the enduring joy of a marriage that has only deepened with time.

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Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

To know him is to be reminded that trauma does not have the final word, that freedom received with humility can become a lifelong act of service, and that a human life can move through history without becoming hardened by it. Long after the coffee cups are empty and the motorcycles are turned toward home, the meaning of his story lingers, not as something heroic and distant, but as something intimate and instructive, a living answer to the question of what we are meant to do with the lives we have been given.

Some men escape a border.

A few spend the rest of their lives proving why that crossing mattered.

My friend Dr. Frank Nagy is one of them.