

Hank Drent

(Hendrik Phillipus Berend Drent, born 20th July 1936, Heerlen, Netherlands)

Witta resident Hank Drent – fondly known as ‘Dutchie’ – was only six years old when he donned the Hitler *Jugend* (Hitler Youth) uniform to save his father from the Gestapo.



Hank grew up in Heerlen, a Dutch town near the German border. During WWII, the young Hank experienced a difficult and confusing time because his father was Dutch and his mother was German.

Prior to war breaking out, Hank’s father would ride his pushbike about 50km to a place near Sittard, another town near the Dutch–German border, where he worked building brick chimney stacks.

Even though Hank was only a child, he clearly remembers 10th May 1940 – the day the Germans invaded the town of Heerlen. It was 7.00am and his father had already left for work, unaware of the invasion.

“My mother heard all the horses outside and on the footpath and we went outside and I stayed behind my mother. We’ve seen all the horses coming down the street,” explains Hank.

(While tanks are the more common images of Nazi Germany during WWII, the reality is that horses pulled two-thirds of the vehicles and supplied 80% of the German Army’s motive power, according to Warfare History Network.)

My mother said, “Oh my God, the German invaded us. So let’s go to the soccer field up there. They got a camp there.”

Hank’s mother was concerned for her two brothers – Emil and Godfried Buschmeier – who were in the German army. When they arrived at the German camp in the soccer field, she approached the commander and asked after her two brothers.

“He came back after a while, he came back and he said, ‘No, we haven’t got any of them here. They might have went somewhere else’.”

Hank’s mother later found out that Emil Buschmeier went to North Africa as a parachute jumper, and Godfried Buschmeier went to the Russian front.

When Emil Buschmeier parachuted out of a plane in North Africa, he was shot and lost his right leg – he amputated it himself.

“After 12 hours, they picked him up, and they took him back to Germany. He was awarded the Iron Cross,” says Hank. “I met him a few times during the war. My mother went to see her brother, and my mother took me with her.”

After Germany invaded Heerlen, Hank’s family moved to Sittard to be closer to his father’s work.

When Hank and his mother went to visit Emil and other family, they would have to cross the border at Vaals, about 40km south of Sittard. To be allowed to cross, they would have to go into the office at Vaals and produce their passports.

On one occasion, Emil had to cross the border but did not have his passport. He was in his German uniform and carried his *ausweis* – an id card (or border crossing permit), so thought it unnecessary. An official ran out of the office and shouted at him to ‘stop’ and demanded to see his *ausweis*.

According to Hank, his uncle hoisted up his leg, showed the official that it was artificial, then pulled the Iron Cross out of his pocket. Emil was allowed to pass and he put the Iron Cross back in his pocket.

After the war, Emil worked in Bielefeld as a gatekeeper at a Miele factory and was given a modified car to drive.

When Godfried came back from the Russian front, Hank only saw him twice in the German city of Duren. Hank says he was a broken man and an alcoholic. He remembers his uncle throwing an ashtray at the TV after Brazil beat Germany in a World Cup (soccer) match.

School days and Hitler Youth

Prior to moving to Sittard, Hank had gone to a Dutch school. But when the family moved to Sittard, he was forced to go to a German school. His mother was against the idea, but she continued to be pressured by the authorities. While at the German school, Hank had no choice but to join the Hitler *Jugend* (Hitler Youth).

“Nothing we can do about it. They told you what to do. So that’s what we did. I had to join the Hitler Youth,” explains Hank.

“I went to the German school for a while, and on and off; and on and off. There was not much school there. When we came up to the school with the uniform on, it was only propaganda you know, what they teach you ... And a lot of the German teachers we had there, they couldn’t even speak German or Dutch, you know.” (The teachers spoke a variety of regional dialects in German and Dutch.)

The young Hank found it all very confusing, he didn’t know whose side he was on.

“I mean, for me it was very odd. Two fights. I had to go in German school or Dutch school or what? I went to German school, and got the air raids coming on, they let us know and send us home.”

“So I went past the Dutch school and told them, ‘we got an air raid on, I’m here today, so you better send the kids home’.”

When the German school found out that Hank was warning the Dutch school about the air raids, they stopped sending him home until after the air raids were over. Hank has vivid memories of the air raids because he could hear the planes long before they flew over.

Saving his father from the Gestapo

It was during his young years that Hank had the unenviable encounter with the Gestapo.

To combat the food shortages of that era, the family grew their own vegetables. But this was in an environment of increasing paranoia, manifested through wartime propaganda machines. Trust was non-existent. Neighbours spied on each other. Treachery was rampant.

When sparrows took a liking to the Drent's snow peas, Hank's father needed to protect the precious food source. He grabbed some newspaper to cover them and in doing so, unwittingly tore a photo of Hitler in two.

"But the neighbour next door, they were in the German party and they must have dobbed my old man in – that he did it," says Hank. "So they came and arrested him, and took him to the SS headquarters down the road in Sittard."

After two days Hank's mother became anxious, so she told her young son to put on his Hitler *Jugend* uniform, and after briefing him on what to say and do, took him down to the SS Headquarters.

"I marched up there and I feel really big. I got the uniform on and big leather belt and a dolk (dagger) ... We come to the front of the guards and they say, 'Heil Hitler'. And I say 'Heil Hitler'. And they asked me, 'What do you want?' I said, 'I've come to get my father'."

The guards were sceptical, but because Hank was wearing the Hitler *Jugend* uniform, they couldn't turn him away.

Young Hank bravely fronted up to "six or seven SS mob" and told them that it was not his father who tore up the photo of Hitler, but the young boy himself. The SS took some convincing, Hank had to keep repeating his story, but eventually, because he was wearing the Hitler *Jugend* uniform, they believed him and Hank's father was released.

"When he (Hank's father) came out, he looked awful. He hadn't had a shave or nothing." Luckily, apart from being unkempt, his father was unharmed.

Hank also recalls the food scarcities and how his family helped others. Their neighbours had a baby that needed milk. The only way they could obtain milk was to collect coupons and take them to the factory. Often there would be no milk left by the time they got there with the coupons, so again, Hank's mother told him to put on the Hitler *Jugend* uniform.

"So Mum said, 'You go and get the milk, for the baby next door. Put your uniform on. You don't have to get the coupons, you just go straight to the front and put the can down

and tell them to fill your can up, take your can and walk off, and come back home again'."

"And I did. I get abused for some other people who called me a *rotmoth*. It means a bad German bastard. You know, those people didn't know what I was doing. I was in two fights. You know, it was a bit of a hard time."

While Hank was only about six years old when he had to join the Hitler Youth, the more common age groups were 10–14 or 14–18. Hank remembers each age group having a different uniform; the younger ones wore a blue uniform; the older ones wore a brown one.

Air raids

The air raids were constant, and Hank could distinguish the different types of planes merely by the sound of them as they approached – the spitfires, the V1-flying bombs (aka buzz bombs or doodlebugs), and towards the end of the war, the new V2 bombers.

"The flying bombs, they were only a short distance, then they never got to England. Some of them landed on the border in Holland and Belgium. So they (the Germans) made a second one that was bigger and they call it the V2. And that one went right to England ..."

"We've seen them come through during the day. A great thing flying through the air, flame blowing out his bum."

On each occasion, the sirens would sound and everyone would have to go into their air raid shelter. Even when the siren sounded, indicating the air raid was over, Hank says he could still hear the planes – the big bombers flying from England to Germany for hours after they passed over. Once they dropped their bombs, they flew back to England over North Holland.

On one occasion, a bomb landed on the Drent's house and lodged in the ceiling. Thankfully it did not explode.

"The bomb ... yair, when we had an air raid on, it must have been about 7 o'clock at night. It was dark when it happened. When the air raid comes on it means you got to go back under to the bunker for shelter. We built the neighbourhood bunker outside in the yard. We go in there."

Afterwards, the emergency services came and safely removed the bomb and took it away. The commission that owned the building then patched the roof up for the family.

The Dutch Resistance

Despite his mother being German, Hank's Dutch father was heavily involved in the Dutch Resistance. It was the Dutch Resistance who advised Hank's mother about how the young boy could rescue his father from the Gestapo by wearing the Hitler *Jugend* uniform.

But Hank was still a child during the war, so a lot of things were kept from him. He was aware that something was going on because on one occasion, their cellar door, underneath their house, was locked. He was forbidden to go in there. Then one day, civilian clothes that did not belong to his family suddenly appeared on the wash line.

The next day the cellar door was unlocked, and the mystery clothes (and any fugitives) had disappeared.

Hank recalls an interconnecting network between the cellars beneath the adjoining properties. The network ended at the corner block which housed people who the Drents suspected of belonging to the German Party. Hank's family avoided that cellar.

"We didn't know as kids. We didn't know that it was a danger for us. You know, we were not allowed to go and see the neighbour – what he got in the cellar. Or what (was in the) the other neighbouring place. So we've been told not to go there."

"We still did once in a while and (if) we get caught, we get a big smack! So some of the neighbours, to stop the kids coming in from one place to the other, they put the board across the wall."

Probably one of the more confronting events that Hank witnessed occurred towards the end of the war.

Liberation by the Americans - 1944

"We heard the noise coming through on the radio that in Normandy, they invaded the Normandy. And the Yankees and the English people were on the way up to come and liberate us and everybody was dancing in the house. But we have to be quiet. We still occupied by Germans. You know we can't overdo it."

"So some people put the Dutch flag up and they get shot if they do that. That's what they did to them in one place where my wife came from. They put that flag up and the Germans were still in the street."

As liberation approached, Hank remembers the US soldiers coming through town in a jeep and one of the Yankees being shot by a German sniper.

"I saw the bloody head. They killed him."

The driver responded by tossing a grenade at the Germans, and a German cannon, and blew it up before retreating.

"So after a while it was all quiet. There was another mob (the Allies) coming. They come from the back way."

"And there's another one came on the other side, only one person. Well, he was all dressed up, the leather clothes and we don't know what he was doing. He looked to us like a Mexican, but he's not. In fact, we found out later on he came from Morocco and joined the army for the Yankees ... He came out and circled around the house and he dropped the small bomb inside the house."

A Yankee soldier then waited at the back door for whoever was inside to come out. Three SS men and one Wehrmacht soldier came running out the back door.

All four Germans were then lined up against a wall. They were told to take their shirts off and put their hands in the air. The Allied soldiers inspected each man, checking for the tattoo underneath their arms to confirm if they were SS.

(The SS soldiers wore a tattoo under the arm identifying their blood group. The ordinary Wehrmacht rarely had the tattoos.)

“The Wehrmacht boy, he had nothing. So they told him to put his hand down again, and ‘you come over here’.”

“So when he came over there, he didn’t know how lucky he was. When he came over, they gave him a smoke and then put him in the back of the jeep. And Red Cross bloke came in there – where they come from suddenly, I don’t know – they dressed his leg and he kept his boots. He had his boots hanging on his neck. He went in the jeep and they took off with him.” “And the American (Moroccan) bloke, the one who had the pistol, he looked long and talked to the other ones. He must have said something we don’t know. We could not understand what he says.”

“So he just pulled the trigger – boom, boom, boom – shot them on the spot. Killed them.”

Not long after that, while the family was visiting Hank’s grandparents for the day in Heerlen, Hank witnessed a convoy of German troops being shot up by three spitfires. The planes circled back to make sure they got the whole convoy which by then, was totally on fire.

Once the Allies had moved through Holland under ‘Operation Market Garden’, and before the end of the war was officially declared, not all military equipment was destroyed or removed. Some things were left behind.

The young Hank and some of his friends chanced upon a box of smoke grenades. They were grey, not green, says Hank. Imbued with newfound feelings of freedom and mischief, the boys decided to test one out.

“We as kids, we tried one. Off he went in the air, no bang. Only white smoke. Hold up the transport and trains. Took about two hours to clear. We got a kick in the bum and told to go home. Some of the adults were smiling a bit. We reckon that was great.”

After the war

After the war, the family moved back to Heerlen and while attending bible classes, Hank met a beautiful girl – Christina (Tina) Kleijne – who would become his future wife. She was the daughter of Johannes Kleijne, the Police Commissioner of Heerlen who was also in the Heerlen Fire Brigade. Hank was only 14 years old.

Hank worked underground in the coal mines but grew tired of that, so when he saw an advertisement for miners in Mt Isa, he jumped at the opportunity. Even though it meant leaving Tina behind, the adventurous young man arrived in Australia in 1953, aged 17.

Initially, he lived under a causeway in Mt Isa until the police moved him on. They suggested he go to the local pub to meet people and try to find accommodation, which he did. A kind man by the name of Heinz Boffo offered him a room and lent him 10 pounds, which he repaid.

He quickly settled into doing dangerous underground work in the Mt Isa mine – drilling, blasting and building underground rail lines.

Eventually, he managed to buy a block of land abundant with timber. Armed only with ingenuity and nous, he built his own dwelling using second-hand corrugated iron sheets for roofing and salvaged forty-four-gallon drums for walls. The metal in the drums was

straightened and, because the timber used for the frame was so hard, he couldn't use nails. Instead, Hank used wire to hang the metal sheets to create walls.

All this time Hank stayed in touch with Tina, working hard and saving money so he could return to Holland and marry her. Finally, in 1959 he made his way to Sydney where he purchased material for Tina's wedding dress and the bridesmaid's dresses from prominent Sydney retailers, Mark Foy's.

However, the journey back to Holland was not without any glitches. Armed with a ticket for the Dutch passenger liner *Johan Van Oldenbarnevelt*, Hank found out that the ship had sailed before its scheduled time and failed to notify him. As compensation, the ship's company provided him with a first-class ticket aboard another ship, an Italian passenger liner called '*Catel Bianco*'. Despite the hiccup, Hank enjoyed the journey, arriving back home in Heerlen with £3,000 in savings that he had brought from Mt Isa and carrying bridal fabrics.

During the voyage, Hank was invited to a ball on the ship but had nothing to wear. Somebody lent him a suit so he could go.



He sailed from Sydney to Genoa, then caught the train to Maastricht, approximately 25 kilometres from Heerlen. The fabrics were made into the bridal party gowns in Holland.

The couple were married in Heerlen on 27th May 1959 with Tina's niece being one of the bridesmaids. Later in life, the niece would wear Tina's wedding dress at her own wedding. The dress has since been worn by other family members and, as of 2024, was still in the family's possession.

After the couple were married, they returned to Australia aboard, *Johan Van Oldenbarnevelt*, a passenger liner that had been converted into a troop ship during WWII, then converted back again after the war.

Hank and Tina returned to Mt Isa where Tina volunteered at the Mt Isa Hospital.

Some time lapsed and Hank sold the block. He and Tina then purchased two adjoining flats, living in one and renting the other out. But in the stifling summer heat of Mt Isa, they had no air-conditioning.

While Hank was a Mt Isa Mines, he worked his way up to becoming a master miner. This involved obtaining a wide variety of 'tickets' through on-the-job training and meant he was skilled across all the different jobs within the mine.

His good friend Ken Slater became the safety officer for Mt Isa Mines but sadly, Ken was killed in a mining accident. The incident was a catalyst for improvements to the safety guidelines in the mine.

After forty years of living in 'The Isa', Hank and Tina retired to Witta in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland in the late 1990s, looking forward to enjoying life near the beaches and a big city.

Sadly, their plans were quashed when Tina developed dementia. Hank cared for her for many years before she ended her days in Erowal Aged Care, Maleny. Tina's illness left her isolated as friends stopped visiting, not knowing what to say or how to deal with the insidious disease.

Meanwhile, Hank's compassionate nature saw him helping other folk. Every day he would visit an elderly fellow – Alan – who was sight impaired. Hank would be at Alan's house at 6.30am every day, make him a cup of tea and help him shave and dress.

Then he would be off to Erowal to visit Tina and help prepare breakfast for around a dozen residents, as well as some of the carers. Hank did this several days a week for around 13 years.

Also, he would often visit people in hospital or take Alan for a drive.

One of Hank's more unusual pastimes involved painting the nails of the female residents. In describing himself as a 'makeup artist' he also helped prepare the bodies of those residents who passed away.

"The nail polish was donated," says Hank. "With permission from the families, I also look after the ladies who have passed away. I dress them and put on make-up, lipstick and powder. And I make sure the eyes are closed. I also dressed men who had passed away. This was a lot easier. Shirt and tie. This was also with the permission from the families."

"You have to be strong to do that. Life must go on. Let them rest in peace."

Hank was also an active member of the Maleny Masonic Lodge. After initially joining the Freemasons in Mt Isa, Hank was involved with the Masonic Lodge for 50 years, earning him the honour of being made a life member while serving the Maleny Masonic Lodge.

Not one to stay idle during retirement, Hank has been a proactive fundraiser for various other local entities.

"In between volunteering with Alan and at Erowal, I worked at an avocado farm. I gathered the seconds and flogged them off for \$3 a bag to raise money to purchase:

- A sitting bench outside Maleny IGA (donated by the Maleny Masonic Lodge)
- Air-conditioners (x 4) and a TV for the dementia section at Erowal
- Air-conditioners (x 2) and a TV for the high care ward section at Erowal
- An Anzac memorial outside the reception building at Erowal
- \$8,000 donated to the hydrotherapy service
- One air-conditioner donated to the Maleny Masonic Lodge
- 40 chairs for the Old Witta School
- A bell for the Witta Recreation Club
- \$500 for a water tank for the River School

•2,500 to the Maleny Hospital (on behalf of the Masonic Lodge).”

Hank’s generous nature has been repeatedly recognised with community awards. Many of these are hanging proudly on the walls of Hank’s house, alongside a sentimental map of the Netherlands, and include:

- Recognition from Blue Care (Maleny Erowal Aged Care Facilities) for volunteering and fundraising – 2005
- The Fisher Community Australia Day Award in recognition of valued service in the Electorate of Fisher – 2006
- Recognition for contribution to the community on behalf of Blue Care, International Volunteer Day – 2008
- Recognition from Blue Care for volunteering at Erowal – 2008
- Nominee - Kleenheat Gas Regional Service Award – 2009
- Volunteering Australia for contribution to the Maleny community – 2010.

Sitting in the lounge of his quaint country house, the garden and veranda littered with quirky memorabilia reflecting his travels and time in the mines, life is much more peaceful for Hank now than it was eighty years ago when his tranquillity was shattered by the ugly sounds of war.

This story is based on an interview by freelance writer and editor – Judy Fredriksen – with Hank Drent, at Hank’s home in Witta on 18 June 2024. It was transcribed and compiled with the valuable assistance of Hannah Eichhorn and David Courtney of Blackall Range Care.