

END OF THE WAR!

By Raymond Py

To a 9-year-old boy, Aug. 14, 1945, the day the war was over, was just another day in that adventure everyone called simply “The War.” For us boys growing up in the 1940s, the war was something to talk endlessly about, to play at with sticks and toy soldiers, and play uniforms and hats. It was something to read about in a vast array of comic and adventure books, and to listen to amid static on the radio.

War’s inhumanity was easily lost on us, and more easily translated into boy talk of high adventure. And we boys suddenly yearned to be grown so that we could share in its excitement.

For a boy of 9, “The War” was imaginary spies in the neighborhood, sending cryptic messages to enemy governments about what we were learning in school or what our fathers did at work. It was heroes like Commando Kelly, who defied double-digit odds to survive the harshest of ordeals. It was scrap drives, waste-paper collections, stamps and war bonds. To a boy, the war was high good times, and we lived it every day.

But when it was finally over, the “finally” and the “over” didn’t register with us boys as it did with older sisters, brothers, parents and grandparents.

And so, when on that bright August day my father came home early from work to take us into downtown Milwaukee so that we could celebrate V-J Day, I was looking for another chapter to put in a book already brimming with a boy’s wartime adventures.

Milwaukee, like all America, was celebrating that day with spontaneity never seen before or since. Offices, factories, stores, bars, lounges, theaters, apartment buildings and hotels all turned out their people.

With no direction, they moved toward the middle of downtown, Third Street at Wisconsin Avenue. That’s where my dad took me and the rest of his family. We came early, not intending to stay late, but the thousands of men, women and children, all locked in a unanimous embrace of celebration, kept us from returning to our car and home anytime soon. We could only wander with the flow.

Musicians had given up their engagements and

set up outside lounges, playing patriotic songs and the music that was part of our wartime culture. Flags flew from every office and store window, and confetti and paper rained down from open windows onto the street and its revelers. Men kissed ladies on the sidewalk, in the street, and against buildings—and the ladies kissed back. People formed lines, circling with their hands the waist of a stranger in front, and danced snakelike in the street. The cars that could be driven moved slowly among the congestion, the drivers honking their horns, windows down, shouting and singing with glee.

Policemen stood by obligingly, smiling, their nightsticks waving harmlessly at the passing crowds. Sailors up from Great Lakes ran from the train station to cluster with the crowd, enjoying handshakes and backslaps like actual war heroes, even though most were not yet out of boot camp. I had never seen anything like it.

By dark, it was hard to move in the crowd, so people just stood, always shouting, maybe singing. When you’re 9, you stare at everything, so I took it all in. But as I was looking up and around, I became separated from my family. Suddenly, I was alone among thousands, lost at Third and Wisconsin avenues. But the war was over, and I remember that I was not afraid. I knew that Commando Kelly had been in this type of situation many times and had always come through.

I climbed a light pole so that I could be seen above the crowd. I was there a long time before I felt a tug on my tennis shoe. I looked down and it was my dad. So I climbed down and we rejoined the rest of the family.

Then my dad and mom, my brother and my little sister and I walked to the Elks Club near Lake Michigan, where my dad was a member. We ate our first meal in peacetime there and watched the parties until very late in the night. A lady who passed our table where I had laid my head down to rest said, “Poor little boy. He should be home in bed.”

But “The War” was over. I was 9. I was right where I was supposed to be. ❖