

Was the Korean War really like M*A*S*H? In their own words, Navy physicians, dentists, nurses, and corpsmen tell the real story of how they practiced medicine during the so-called "forgotten war," often in unimaginable circumstances.

Frozen in Memory: U.S. Navy Medicine in the Korean War

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FROZEN IN MEMORY

**U.S. Navy Medicine
in the
Korean War**

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Chosin

By late September 1950, Gen. Douglas MacArthur's brilliantly planned and executed landing at Inchon and the swift recapture of Seoul had dramatically changed the complexion of the war. United Nations troops, once faced with annihilation by the North Koreans, were on the offensive in South Korea chasing the fleeing enemy back across the 38th Parallel. It was then that President Truman, supported by a UN resolution to establish a free and united Korea, made the fateful decision not only to punish the aggressors who had started the war but to liberate the communist North, thereby insuring the reunification of the two Koreas.

The coup de grâce was to be another landing, this time on North Korea's east coast. Extreme tides had bedeviled the Inchon planners. At Wonsan, the problem was a heavily mined harbor that delayed the landing for nearly two weeks. As the mine-clearing proceeded, the Marines aimlessly cruised up and down the Korean coast aboard LSTs and other vessels in what the men derisively called "Operation Yo Yo."

When the Marines finally disembarked at Wonsan, the port had already been captured by ROK (Republic of Korea) and UN troops. Greeting them was a sign reading "Bob Hope welcomes you." What these troops could not know was that within a few short weeks the war in Korea would again change dramatically. As the Marines were working their way north, they were moving ever closer to the Manchurian border. Gone was their traditional role of conducting operations from and near the sea. They now encountered rugged mountain terrain, a brutal winter climate, and finally thousands of quilt-uniformed Chinese who suddenly descended upon them in hordes. Today, places and events are frozen in the memories of the campaign's survivors—Sudong, Chosin Reservoir, Yudam-ni, East Hill, Toktong Pass, Hagaru-ri, Koto-ri.

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First Encounter

Hospital corpsman Bill Davis, stiff from being cooped up aboard an LST for nearly two weeks as Wonsan Harbor was being cleared, looked forward to taking on the foe in another glorious amphibious operation. Although the landing turned out to be bloodless and anticlimactic, his 7th Marines would be the first Americans to encounter a new and far more numerous enemy.

When we got to Wonsan we were all hyped up for the landing but, in the interim, the South Koreans had crossed the 38th Parallel and occupied the place. When we landed, there was a great big sign that said, "Bob Hope and the 1st Marine Air Wing Welcome the 1st Marine Division to Wonsan."

Col. [Homer] Litzenberg, the regimental commander, was mad, to say the least. He had had this vision of charging ashore. Marines don't want to come ashore and find Bob Hope there.

Litzenberg said, "We're getting out of here." So we marched to Hamhung without stopping, maybe thirty-five miles from where we landed.

When we got to Hamhung, they put us in some kind of warehouse, and we just sat around and waited for something to happen. The popular song of the Korean War was "Goodnight Irene," and we sang it in this big warehouse for hours.

A guy named Kelly had been an engineer on a railroad in Chicago. When we found a railroad train outside, someone thought it would be nice to be able to drive it. Kelly said that if we could get some wood he could. So we went out, found wood, and old Kelly got it started. We all had a ride up the track, not going anywhere in particular, just back and forth. This went on until they came and dragged us off. But it killed the time.

We weren't there two days and then we began to form up for what would be the move north. It was fairly calm until we got to a place called Sudong. This was early November, and it was the first time, it turns out, the Chinese were actually in combat with the 1st Marine Division. The 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, was the first unit to fight with them, and it was at night when they attacked us. They had us surrounded with bugles, loudspeakers, and green flares. That was a tough night and one hell of a battle. We worked all night long because we had one hell of a lot of casualties. We'd had firefights and casualties before but never anything like this.

One of our wounded was a guy named Archie van Winkle, a platoon sergeant of the 3rd platoon. He had been shot in the belly and was lying on the deck when I got to him. He was very badly hit, and I had to bandage him in four different places. All I got was a thready pulse. I didn't think he was going to make it down off that hill, and I wrote on his little toe tag that he was KIA. Well, obviously he wasn't because he got down off the hill, recovered, stayed in the Marines, and eventually became a colonel. Later he was awarded the Medal of Honor for what he did on that hill.

All we had were bandages and morphine. We had to get the casualties back to the battalion aid station before they could get IVs and what have you. Our company, which might have had one hundred fifty men, maybe a little more than that with the mortar and machine gun people, took thirty or forty casualties that night. That's a hell of a lot of casualties for one battle. The

Chinese then disappeared, and we never saw them again until we got up to the Chosin Reservoir.

I recall an incident that took place right after Sudong. Some Koreans had outside brick ovens. They cooked on them and also hid in them, whether from the North Koreans or us. A civilian told our translator that there was somebody inside one of those ovens who had been hurt. They sent me. It was a girl about twelve years old who was wounded in the hand and had gangrene up to her elbow. I knew damn well that it had advanced far enough so that it would take her arm at least or kill her at worst. But I put sulfa powder and a bandage on anyway. I left some bandages with the civilians and we took off. Afterward, those people had nothing, absolutely nothing. That was one of the sad parts of being a corpsman over there.

* * *

Cold Weather Combat

Late fall and winter of 1950 in North Korea was the coldest on record, arctic in its intensity. The mercury plummeted almost overnight, with temperatures dropping to nearly thirty-five degrees below zero. Merely sustaining life in such weather was arduous enough. Keeping warm, eating, drinking, and even relieving oneself—all normal functions in a temperate climate—became anything but routine. For Marines fighting off swarms of Chinese bent on exterminating them, most everything began to appear hopeless.

As oil and grease thickened and then froze, rifles, carbines, and machine guns ceased to function. Mortar base plates became brittle and cracked. Artillery recoil mechanisms balked, drastically reducing the rate of fire. Unless jeep and truck engines were kept running, crankcase oil took on the viscosity of molasses. Batteries died, canned rations solidified, and canteen water froze. Dehydration is a given in a sun-baked desert, but no one could have anticipated dehydration in the cold. Unable to drink, men sucked snow to relieve their thirst, further lowering body temperature and making them more susceptible to hypothermia. And the greatest by-product of the cold—frostbite—downed more men than Chinese bullets.

Gunnery Sgt. Garrison Gigg, attached to the 1st Engineer Battalion of the 1st Marines, recalls the torment of cold weather combat.

Weapons

We learned real quickly that you couldn't use Lubriplate (white grease) or oil on rifles and machine guns, absolutely none, because both would instantly freeze. Then you had to take your Ka-Bar [knife] or bayonet and try to scrape it off the bolt to get it to function. The bolt and everything had to be dry.

The artillery also had a heck of a problem. Normally, the guns would fire, then recoil and go back into battery, ready for another shell in a matter of a second. A good crew could get off fifteen, twenty, or twenty-five rounds a minute. But the cold weather was so bad on the artillery that when they fired, it sometimes took five minutes or longer for the gun to come back into battery so the crew could load another round. As a result, we lost 65 to 70 percent of our firepower.

Clothing

If you were going to start from scratch and go from the skin out, you had your Marine Corps issue skivvies—[boxer] shorts and T-shirt. Some guys had long underwear—long johns— some didn't. The majority of us that came in at Wonsan didn't have the long underwear. Over a period of time we managed to scrounge up some. I remember having a pair but I don't ever remember changing my underwear for ten or twelve days from when the Chinese hit us at Chosin until we got back down aboard ship and took a shower.

If you had a winter shirt—your greens—you wore that. Then you wore heavy green trousers if you had them. If not, you wore dungaree trousers. And if you had those, you wore those besides the green trousers. Then you wore any sweatshirts or anything else on the top. They issued a pair of what they called cold weather pants with the parkas. They were windproof. You put that over the top of everything else you had on.

Then you wore the parka, which was about knee length and had buttons and a belt. If you got your own size you were lucky. If you didn't, you took what was available. It was not fleece lined but had a carpeting kind of material. They called it a fur lining but it was more nappy than fluffy. You can get some jackets like that today from L.L. Bean.

Then you wore your helmet and gloves with wool liners on the inside. Those were separate. You put on the wool liners and then the outer glove, which was made of a kind of canvas and leather. The top part was like a boat canvas, and the palms were like a work glove an electrician or a lumberjack might wear. It was not real heavy leather but a supple leather. Both hands had the trigger finger built into it as part of the glove. The top part was cloth and the palm of the glove was leather. With the glove on, it was extremely difficult to get the trigger finger through the trigger guard so a lot of the guys would cut that part of the glove off. Sometimes that caused the trigger finger to freeze to the trigger. It was like sticking your tongue on a light pole in the winter.

Headgear

We had caps with a little bill and ear flaps you could tie down under your chin. It was fleece lined and Marine Corps green. Over that you wore your helmet or

your parka and your helmet on top of that. The problem with wearing the hat and even the parka was that if you were in a fire fight, running a ridge, or whatever you were doing, you needed to be able to correspond with whoever was next to you. But, in some cases, it was snowing so hard you couldn't see. So you had to go by voice command. You also needed to hear the snow crunch if someone was trying to sneak up on you. We'd put out concertina wire with cans on it and if someone tried to come through the wire, they'd make noise. But with that hat on, with the ear muffs tied down, and the parka tied down over your ears, it was difficult to hear, so you had to undo those. And when you did, it exposed your ears to frostbite. A lot of the frostbite cases are having problems now. I'm having problems with both of my ears from frostbite. My ears are starting to point like a Martian's. They're not black, but they are exceedingly brown.

Footgear

We wore the so-called shoepacs. They were all rubber and black. You've seen Mickey Mouse wearing his boots? That's about what they looked like. In fact, they called them Mickey Mouse boots. They were uninsulated rubber, as I recall, with a removable felt inner sole. You had two pairs of those. You kept one pair next to your body trying to keep them dry or to dry them out after they got wet. And the other pair you kept in your boots. The whole idea for these boots was to keep your feet warm. As long as you were walking it was great. They worked perfectly well. As a matter of fact, they worked so well that your feet would perspire and actually made water. The felt pads then soaked up that perspiration. Then, when you stopped, the water in the shoepacs froze. You usually wore two pairs of socks, sometimes three, whatever you had. They'd get wet and freeze to your skin. When you took your boots off, you'd take the skin off with it.

Frostbite

I didn't realize I had a problem until I got back down to the Bean Patch [Masan] and my feet started to hurt and the skin started to peel and crack. But my frostbite was not as bad as some. The problems really started about fifteen years ago, and now it's getting progressively worse. Some days are worse than others. When the circulation stops you also lose sensation in your feet. But when you start walking or rubbing your feet, the tingling begins when the circulation begins to come back.

Some of the symptoms are drying skin, rotting, cracking largely due to lack of circulation. I've lost three toenails on one foot and half a big toe. I've also lost the big toenail on the other foot. My feet are always cracked and blistering. Apparently the frostbite does something to the capillaries and smaller vessels in your feet the older you get. As time wears on, they get worse and worse until you have no circulation, and eventually they drop off. It's almost like getting gangrene. We

have a fellow who heads our “Chosin Few” cold injury committee who now walks around in specially made shoes. His feet are probably five inches long. The rest of his feet have just rotted away. They’ve had to cut away parts of his feet and he’s had multiple surgeries over the years.

The infantry guys in the line companies who were running the ridges were constantly on the move with the sweat and the cold. We had a couple of Marines in the foxhole next to us. A corpsman hollered for litter bearers. I crawled out of my hole and, with a couple of other guys, went over and lugged these men out. Their feet were black. They had been out there sweeping the ridges while we were farther on down the mountain protecting the convoy—the line of march—and the MSR, the main supply route.

Food and personal hygiene

We had a heck of a hard time eating. Our C-rations were frozen and the only way you could possibly get them warm was if you were lucky enough to have a bulldozer, a truck, or a jeep nearby. You put the C-ration can on the engine block so it would thaw. And then when you opened the can, it might be partially thawed or it might not be. You then scraped away what was thawed and ate that. Then you would thaw it out some more and eat that, so you were constantly eating frozen food that was probably frozen and rethawed God knows how many times before you got through the can.

We had no purification systems with us so the only water we drank was melted snow, or we simply ate snow which was probably full of *e-coli*, botulism, salmonella, or whatever. A lot of guys, including me, had a very bad case of what I called stomach-rot. Imagine you’ve got diarrhea and you’ve got all these clothes on. You’re in a foxhole and the head is some boulders some four or five meters behind your foxhole.

One night we were in an area with some downed trees so we had some cover. You knew that as soon as you picked your head out of the foxhole the Chinese were going to shoot at you. So you unbuttoned all your clothes and got ready to go down to the head. Then you made a dash for it. When you got there, you dropped your drawers, did your business, and reached for your C-ration toilet paper. By the time you got the toilet paper, you had nothing but frozen dingle berries. You pulled up your pants and went back up to the foxhole. In about fifteen minutes, your body heat would melt the feces you had left. You came out of there with ulcers on your rear end and you smelled something terrible. But, of course, it was so damned cold, you couldn’t smell anything anyhow. A lot of people walked down that mountain range with ulcerated rear ends from the cold. And that’s not fiction; it’s fact.

I don’t remember shaving from the time we left Wonsan and started up to Sudong where we ran into our first Chinese. I cannot remember having any way of

shaving or cleaning myself or doing anything from the time we first got hit until we got aboard ship again. I don't even remember that first shower, and don't know what happened to my clothes.

Burying the Dead

We had a lot of dead at Yudam-ni, Hagaru [ri], and at Koto-ri. We were getting near the tail end and were attacking toward the sea. The vehicles were loaded with wounded and there was not room for all the dead. And the Marine Corps always says you take your wounded and your dead with you. At Hagaru [ri] and Koto-ri that was impossible. The worst thing was witnessing the digging of a mass grave there at Hagaru [ri]. We used explosives to try to soften up the ground, but we just couldn't do it. It was so damned hard. We welded teeth on the dozer blades and, in combination with explosives, we tried to soften up the ground. There were some huts in that area where there had been fires and the ground was soft underneath. We bulldozed the huts down and eventually got the graves dug. We buried two hundred Marines and Royal Marines in that grave.

At Koto-ri we dug a light airstrip so C-47s could come in. The first day we had that strip operational, 700 wounded were evacuated. At Koto-ri we dug another grave and left 125 more bodies there. That's the stuff that haunts you and you can never get rid of it.

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Frozen in Memory

Lt.(j.g.) Henry Litvin, MC, now a "veteran" of Inchon, Kimpo Airport, and Seoul, recalls how he cared for the sick and wounded of the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, and survived an unmerciful environment where it always seemed that the very next moment would be his last.

From mid-October to early November, we slowly worked our way up east of the [Chosin] Reservoir. Patrols that went out brought in Chinese prisoners every once in a while. And then suddenly the weather turned cold. I was having breakfast one morning, gulping down some eggs. When I went to get the coffee, it was frozen. I couldn't imagine coffee freezing. We didn't have a thermometer but it had to have been well below zero. It occurred to me right then that practicing medicine was going to be a difficult thing.

I attended a meeting of Marine officers somewhere up on the way to Hagaru-ri, where they talked about the move we were going to make north. Many things were discussed but the thing that stuck in my mind was a high-ranking Marine officer's comments about frostbite. I vividly remember him talking about it the same way he'd view a sunburn, namely, something that could be avoided. So when I first heard

about frostbite, I figured these guys were going to get into trouble. But frostbite couldn't be avoided when you were pinned down, had sweaty feet, and couldn't change your socks. If you were wounded and lying there, you couldn't change your socks. If you were wounded and strapped to a vehicle, your sweat froze.

In hindsight, it's a miracle that anybody avoided frostbite. It didn't resemble trench foot as in World War I, when feet were cold and wet for long periods of time. We were wearing shoepacs which were rubberized boots. If you walked twenty feet in them, your feet started to perspire. And if you stopped, they'd freeze. I was in a position where I could maybe change my socks once a day. But there were a lot of troops who could not change their socks when they were pinned down or fighting. Changing your socks at twenty below with a stiff breeze is murder, but they did it. We'd go up and down the line telling people to stamp their feet, change their socks, and keep moving.

As for clothing, everybody had long johns, two layers of trousers, those flannel shirts, maybe a field jacket. Everybody had a parka and gloves. When we tried to deal with the wounded, we'd take our gloves off and our fingers would freeze.

Water was also a problem in that intense cold. Everybody was dehydrated. I had never experienced such an overwhelming thirst. You read about the exhaustion and the cold, but you never read about the dehydration. There was nowhere to get a drink. Up in those mountains the humidity is low. We were losing a lot of moisture from our skin. Once I grabbed a canteen and found myself trying to suck ice; the contents were frozen solid. There were water trucks down south, but I never saw them up north. We had to melt snow to make coffee. For days we went without any food. We were starved but not hungry. At one point someone found a cache of Tootsie Rolls so we loaded up on Tootsie Rolls.

Everybody had runny noses. It ran into their moustaches and froze. Everybody was filthy, grimy, dirty, and crawling with lice. And can you imagine having to move your bowels. The wind's blowing twenty or thirty miles an hour and it's forty below zero and you have to go. You do what you have to do and you don't have time to wipe. Peeing was easy.

If you were treating a wound, you'd cut through the clothing to where the wound was, or you'd put a battle dressing over the clothes and make sure the wound wasn't leaking blood. I remember vividly one Marine after Yudam-ni. When he approached the tent, it looked like he had a block of pink cotton candy sitting on his shoulder. I couldn't imagine what I was looking at. As he got closer, I noticed it was pink, frothy ice. I broke it off and then realized he had been hit and had a bleeder above his ear. Frozen blood is frothy pink. It was actively bleeding and freezing, bleeding and freezing.

It seemed that the intense cold inhibited bleeding. The wounds we saw had already been wrapped by corpsmen in the companies. If the battle dressing was in

place, even over their clothing, and there was no leaking blood, we just checked the battle dressing and left the wounds alone.

I saw head wounds and leg wounds. There were some belly wounds. There were countless extremity wounds that blur in my mind. There was one guy with a sucking chest wound, and I remember getting an idea. I said, "Does anybody have a rubber?" Then thinking, "Who would have condoms up here?" One guy had one. I unrolled it, taped it over the wound, and cut some little slits in it thinking that if he developed a pressure pneumothorax, the air would get out. I was able to get this kid out on a helicopter.

Remember, the helicopters then were not like the ones in Vietnam. There was a bubble for the pilot and, if there was a guy on a litter, half of him stuck out. He was the only one I got out by helicopter. We saw helicopters that looked like the wind had dashed them against the sides of the mountains. They looked like broken little toys. There weren't a lot of helicopters flying.

The Chinese attacked at night or when it snowed, for the most part, often announcing their presence with whistles and bugles. But the thing I remember most were the mortar explosions. All night long you heard them. And all those explosions didn't do much to improve my hearing. I had tinnitus then, which I didn't pay much attention to, but I'm sure my deafness today is related to that. After seeing all the bullet holes in the tent canvas, you wanted to go outside and stretch and look around. In the morning, I remember seeing hundreds of unexploded Chinese mortar shells on the ground.

We worked at night because that's when most of the wounded were coming in. We had no table. Most of the time we were on our knees or bent over somebody on the ground or on a litter doing some procedure.

I never saw a pair of sterile gloves in Korea. I never saw forceps or anything sterile in Korea. The only things sterile were the battle dressings and the morphine syrettes.

We never knew how long it was going to be until the wounded person could get to further care. So we protected them by using sulfa. I think it was more for ourselves. We were doing something. At the time you didn't think too much about it. You just did it. We never had IV fluids at any time at our battalion level. They would have frozen solid.

Down south when you treated the wounded, you checked for bleeding, splinted them, gave them something for pain, and evacuated them. Up north you did the same things, but you had to hold onto your patients because there was no way to get them out and the numbers kept growing. Soon we were getting hundreds of casualties yet there was no place to put them. When we had wounded and no place to send them, we'd push them to the side or get them into another tent if there was one—and usually there wasn't—or out in the open covered with a tarp. Or we'd

put them in a truck and stack them like cordwood. We stacked them the way the dead were stacked. We tied them on the hoods of jeeps or trucks. There was no regiment to send them back to. We were the end of the line—the rear guard. If men could walk, they walked.

I remember a lieutenant. He looked like a very young kid—blond hair. They brought him in and put him down. There was a bullet hole in the side of his helmet. He was lying on the snow and breathing but not conscious. I removed his helmet and his brains spilled out like oatmeal onto the snow. He was still breathing and had a pulse. The bullet had entered and ricocheted around the inside of his helmet. I remember putting the helmet back and saying, “Move him out there.” These are memories that stay in your head forever.

We went days and nights without rest. We were exhausted. There were few times when you could get horizontal because it was at night when the casualties were coming. During the day you were moving so you went days with no real sleep. When we stacked the wounded on trucks, you thought, “Thank God, at least they are getting to lie down.” But I’m sure many wounded froze. The fact that I kept walking, like most of the guys at the aid station, helped me avoid freezing. If you stopped and sat, you’d freeze. I can’t prove that many of the wounded froze, but I suspect that’s what must have happened.

I don’t know what we would have done without the corpsmen. There were corpsmen who had been seasoned in World War II and there were corpsmen as green as I was. They didn’t have to fight with rifles but went where they were called. They were always on the go. I wasn’t up with the companies to see them, but at the rate they were getting hit, these guys were unsung heroes. When the call went out for corpsmen, they went.

One memory stands out. It was November 27th, about 10 P.M.. Our unit was point battalion for the Division and we were a few miles northwest of Yudam-ni. There had been some firing during the day and we had stopped for the night. Seven or eight of us were sitting around in a tent. There was a lantern going. It was cold and the wind was blowing. Suddenly this guy slides down the hill right through the side of our tent with no shoepacs on, no helmet. He says, “Where’s the colonel? Where’s the colonel? I need to tell him. They’ve overrun us! Fox Company has been overrun.” It seems the Chinese were atop the hill just above us.

With that, all of us flew out of the tent, door or no door, right through the sides. I rolled down across a little road, down a gully toward a frozen little creek. It was dark but I hid behind a bunch of bushes and lay there shaking. The attack had started and there was a racket—whistles, bugles, rockets, explosions, and firing. People were shouting. “What do I do?” I thought. I couldn’t see what was going on. I asked myself, “What am I supposed to do?” I lay there with another guy. I never knew who he was.

After a while we heard, “Corpsman! Corpsman!” With that, all of us moved back to the aid station and began to treat the wounded. No matter how scared I was, and believe me, I was scared, when you did your job you weren’t helpless. Perhaps the sprinkling of sulfa into their wounds was more for me than it was for the patient. In a bombardment when you were doing nothing but waiting for a shell to drop, you were completely helpless and that was traumatic as hell and the most devastating thing in the world. There were days on the way back when we’d look up toward dawn and see light shining everywhere through the canvas and realize that the tent was full of bullet holes. But I understood that as long as I was doing something, I didn’t sit there like a shaking lump of jelly. Work was a great thing for the doc—it overcame his terror.

On the morning of the 28th of November the decision was made to move back to Hungnam. The 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, became the rear guard. As we began moving back to Yudam-ni, we came under fire. I remember there was nowhere to hide. Mortar rounds and fire were coming in. We had seen Chinese coming over the mountains and my feeling was, “Let’s get the hell out of here. Let’s keep going *that way*.”

We didn’t move a quarter of a mile before we saw Chinese pouring over the hill we just left. They were all around us. We felt they were going to overrun us then or in the next hour. I felt like I was literally waiting to die.

Somewhere about halfway between Yudam-ni and Hagaru [ri] was Toktong Pass, which I didn’t particularly notice on the way up. I have a vivid freeze-frame of it in my mind’s eye today for the following reason.

During the days and nights we were on the road between Yudam-ni and Toktong Pass, we were on a little road carved into the side of a mountain. To our left was a several-hundred-foot mountain, and to our right was a drop of hundreds and hundreds of feet. The days were short that time of year so it was dark most of the time. Most of the time during the day we were in the shadow of this mountain. I don’t remember much sunlight or I wasn’t aware that we were in darkness most of the time until we got to Toktong Pass.

We had been moving slowly. We’d stop and wait until the enemy had been cleared. Then we’d move and then stop. We spent days and nights on that road. When we got to Toktong Pass, looking forward I could see a turn in the road. The hill on our left kind of fell away and I watched troops ahead of me—six, eight, or ten men—get on the right side of a vehicle and at someone’s signal they took off and started to run. When I finally got to that point of departure, I saw this brilliant, white, snow-covered field in brilliant sunshine. It was like being backstage in a theater where people stand before going onstage. And at a signal, we began running in the wide open across this brilliant white snow field, crouched over. It seemed quiet but for the sound of bullets flying. They make a buzz when they go by—a high-pitched “bzz, bzz,” like bees. About halfway across we stopped because we found two Marines in the snow.

Quickly we ran to the back of a crackerbox ambulance. When we opened it up, we found there was absolutely no room. We had somebody on the fenders, and there was literally no place to put these two fellows.

Then there was a moment that seemed to stretch out forever when the driver was looking at me. “What do we do?”

It seemed like forever between his question and my saying, “Go!” It couldn’t have been more than a split-second, but it felt like an eternity with that white, bright sun, the white snow, bullets singing, being nakedly exposed out in the open.

It seemed like there were a thousand things coming in at you. If that ambulance goes, that’s your invisible shield protecting you from the bullets. You want to run but you have to stay with these guys. All of a sudden that road with the hills to the left and the drop off to the right seemed like a safer place. And then off went the ambulance. We waited for another vehicle, got the wounded aboard, and then took off and ran until we caught up with the line of troops on the road.

When I was a kid I used to love when it snowed. It meant we could go sledding and play in it. For years after I got back I felt sadness and anxiety when it began to snow, and I could never figure out why until one day it occurred to me. When it snowed up there in the north, the Corsairs wouldn’t be flying and there would be no air cover. We were on our own.

For years afterwards, I kept models of [F4U] Corsairs. They’re up in the attic somewhere now. Those gull-winged planes gave us close air support. It was like having a whole artillery regiment where you wanted them when you wanted them. We saw them in action in the south and thanked God for them. But up north, when we were encircled and felt isolated and helpless, to have those guys fly by at eye level and see their faces smiling, and have them give us the “thumbs up” sign, that really made us feel good. You could see them napalming, rocketing, and machine gunning the enemy. You knew they were blasting our way out. They were literally rescuing angels. I’ve always thought that if it hadn’t been for the Corsairs, we might not have gotten out.

On the way down between Yudam-ni and Hagaru [ri], someone brought in two or three Chinese prisoners. These guys were dressed in quilted uniforms and were wearing sneakers. You never saw frostbite like this—huge bullae on their feet.¹ You can’t be out there wearing sneakers like these guys wore. They just froze. Some of their wounded had been treated by their docs, who packed their wounds with gauze to get some hemostasis. We used pressure dressings on our men. We couldn’t do anything for the Chinese and, when we moved out, we left their wounded behind.

For days we were moving down from Yudam-ni to Hagaru [ri] and the Marines were fighting like hell. I don’t know how many days we walked. I never rode. I always walked. But I noticed that as we got closer to Hagaru [ri], everybody began

changing the way they walked. When we entered Hagaru [ri], we were marching like military men.

At Hagaru [ri], all our wounded were turned over to Regiment. There was an airstrip so they were able to fly them out. When there was an air drop, you had to run to get out of the way because when those things came down—food and military supplies—they'd flatten tents and go right through huts. But it was exciting. It made you feel good. They hadn't forgotten us.

On December 6th, troops had been filing out of Hagaru [ri] all day on the way to Koto-ri. By nightfall, there were few troops left to defend our position from the same number of Chinese we had been fighting for three days. That's when they brought in Capt. Uel Peters [commanding officer, Fox Company] sitting on a litter holding a tourniquet. His leg was out like that, a compound fracture, displaced, and his flesh was glowing. We were in a tent with a Coleman lantern which didn't provide great light. "What the hell's that?" I asked. One of my corpsmen told me it was white phosphorus. I thought, "What the hell do you do with white phosphorus?"

He gave me a solution, told me it was copper sulfate, and told me to dab it on the wound. I remember dabbing it for hours until all the glow went away. That corpsman knew about white phosphorus from the South Pacific battles of World War II.

Peters had flesh and bone exposed but his wound was not actively bleeding. In fact, I don't remember seeing any active arterial bleeding while I was up there but for that guy who had the block of ice on his shoulder. Peters subsequently lost that leg. The thought has many times gone through my head, "Could I have done something different?" But I guess I did the best I could. These kinds of thoughts stay with you.

About half a city block away from our aid station, East Hill began to rise. It reminds me of that Prudential ad with the Rock of Gibraltar. There were a lot of hills but it stuck out. It was a big, ominous, dark, forbidding presence. To me, it has to be symbolic because that's where many of our troops were dying.

That same day—the 6th—everybody was funneling out of that valley blowing up supplies we didn't want to leave for the enemy. We were headed for a place called Koto-ri. Well, we were the last ones left that night. I was thinking, "We're dead!" All the troops who had been fighting off the Chinese had gone and we were still there. And we had the same enemy to deal with. That was a night! That was the night they brought in Karle Seydel. Karle Seydel was the guy who took me under his wing on the ship before Inchon and had shown me the ropes. He had taught me how to put my pack on.... He was a Marine's Marine and yet he stood on the railing of that ship going to Inchon reciting poetry. He was important to me because he reached out to me. "Don't worry, Doc. You're with amtracs and you're not with the infantry. You'll be all right."

They brought Karle in and he had a bullet in his forehead. I remember...so many dead, so many wounded. But this guy I knew better than I knew anybody else. I spent more time with him. It seemed so terrible. I wanted to do something, but his face was gray and he was dead. Every Memorial Day after that I'd reminisce, and Karle Seydel's name would come up. I'd remember him there at Hagaru [ri]. He wasn't the first dead Marine I saw, but he was a very important Marine. I have a hard time with his death to this day.

Many times I had the feeling of utter hopelessness. There's no way to get out of here. We're too far away from the sea. We're seventy miles up in the mountains and we're completely surrounded. And they could have destroyed us but didn't. Maybe the Chinese knew they were up against Marines who knew a thing or two about how to fight.

Another thing amazes me. To have walked the distance we did out of there is mind-boggling until you consider the Marines who ran up and down the hills covering us. It's one thing to make the hike but how about the guys who were running up and down tangling with the enemy on top of those ridges!

There is one view I have where we came around the bend of a road and all of a sudden I could see a plain in the distance. There were no longer peaks and valleys. It was a broad plain. We were at the bottom of a mountain range and prepared to head down toward the sea. They put us on trains—flatcars—wood-burning trains—and took us the last ten or twenty miles. It was at night. You were sitting on a flatcar with one Marine right up against you and another right behind. We were numb with exhaustion. A shower of sparks from the locomotive was falling on us, and I remember watching the sparks burning holes in my parka—pretty, orange holes burning in my parka.

We got to Hungnam and showers and food. I don't have a memory of seeing the ships until we were getting ready to board them. Being pulled aboard those ships, I remember thinking, "The Navy didn't abandon me. The Navy didn't forget about me." When I got to the top of the ladder, a couple of sailors grabbed me and I went sliding across the deck as happy as a lark. The first time I walked into a bathroom and started peeling my clothes off I looked at myself. Skin and bones...and this beard. I had lost thirty-three pounds.

I'm not equipped to evaluate warriors, but, from what I saw, those Marines were superb. I never saw a Marine officer or enlisted man who looked scared. That doesn't mean they weren't. Everybody was doing what had to be done. I never saw anybody smile and never heard any joking or clowning up there. But the Marines fought and fought well, and maintained discipline. They took care of the aid station and protected it. They supplied the vehicles when I needed them. They looked out for their wounded and brought all their wounded back.

There are few things in my life that I can feel as proud of as my service to this country in Korea with the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. I didn't like it one damn bit. I was there and luckily I survived. The Navy needed doctors and I happened to be one of them. I've been prouder of that than anything else I've ever done.

* * *

Bitter Cold and No Fires

In a letter to his father written immediately after the withdrawal to Hungnam, Dr. Chester Lessenden, Regimental Surgeon of the 5th Marines, recounts the stark terror of the hunted and the true horror that was Chosin.

December 11 or 12, 1950

Dearest Dad,

I haven't written for some time, but much has happened. I hardly know where to start. . . . On the night of Nov. 27 (Sunday) we arrived just north of Y-D-N (Yudamni) and just north of the 7th Marines position. That night we pitched our tents in the dark and prepared to do our usual work. About 11 pm all hell broke loose. We had heard an attack going on a mile north of us and had received about 40 casualties. We loaded all our vehicles and started them toward Hagaru [ri].

While they were gone, these Gooks started attacking *us*.² It seems there was a draw about 200 yards ahead and to our right. The Gooks used this draw to bypass our troops on the hills ahead and come down on us. Meanwhile, our vehicles returned with the news that there was a roadblock between us and Hagaru-ri. That was the start of it. We beat off the attack, all right, but the casualties continued to come in. At dawn on the 28th, our aid station moved a mile back and consolidated with the 7th Marines aid station. By the end of the day we were holding 400 patients and no place to put them. We got all the tents in both regiments (about 12) and took over four Gook houses. And still we had 100 or so. We put 18 inches of straw in this courtyard, put the patients in it, and covered it all with a big tarp. It was bitter cold, and no fires, of course, but I think those under the tarp spent the night better than anyone.

We stayed in this spot the 29th and got an air drop of tents (but no poles) stoves and blankets and stretchers. That night everyone was under cover and reasonably warm. We put straw on the tent floors and made them snug.

On the 30th word came we were to consolidate more and the aid station was to be taken in by the artillery. We made it but it took all day—move out the patients, take down the tents and haul them a couple of miles and put up the tent again and put the patients in it. I made the last trip on a helicopter. By this time we had about 600 patients. This night (the 30th) we all got a good night's sleep, the last for a while. I

slept like a baby although the guns fired all night. They were the big 155s and they were firing in seven different directions. What I mean, we were surrounded.

The next day, Dec. 1, we got sudden word to pack all patients, burn our gear and prepare to get out of there.³ All non-litter casualties were to walk, as were we. So we did it. The frontlines were 20 yards from us by the time we got the last patient loaded and the gear fired. I never wanted to leave anyplace so much in my life, but those kids lying there on the stretchers never said a word, just awaited their turn.

In the fire I burned everything but my camera and the clothes I had on—my watch, a bottle of whiskey, a case of brandy, my little red leather suitcase and all my letters.

When the patients were loaded (it took practically every wheeled thing in both regiments and the artillery because by this time there were about 800 of them) we moved back 1½ miles and waited and waited and waited. I wish I could describe the scene to you but words fail me. The stream of vehicles laden with wounded, the crowd of men on the road, the smoke from burning gear and above all the terrible uncertainty of not knowing what was happening—no one knew and we all felt it. It's such an intangible thing but so real when it was happening—this "feeling."⁴

Anyway, we walked in circles all afternoon and night waiting for the word to move. It was another bitter cold night and these poor kids lying on litters on trucks and trailers and we didn't have enough stuff to keep them warm. Those that could walk we rotated through a Gook house all night (the MPs ran the civilians out). We used lots of morphine and the regimental chaplains (two of them) spent the night heating C rations in this Gook house for which I plan to write them up.⁵ They, the chaps, were so tired they could hardly stand, but they got everyone fed hot chow.

When the sun came up everything seemed a little better, but there had been lots of suffering during the night. Along in the middle of the day we got under weigh [*sic*]. We and our 800 charges slowly wound our way a mile or two when they stopped us in a field and lo and behold there were 50 or 60 more seriously wounded marines. Some way we got them aboard and again we waited for the convoy to move. Mind you, we could only move as far as the infantry could fight ahead of us opening the road. The harder the fight was the more people we had in our train.

Dr. [Howard] Greaves and I finally got these 60 aboard our sagging vehicles and we were exhausted. We located a hay stack and crapped out only we just about froze so we went into this gook house and it was so warm. We really soaked it up. So much so that our feet began to sweat. Eventually we got the word to move out. We'd move 50 yards and wait an hour. Dr. Greaves got sick so I put him in the last seat available and covered him up.

All that night we'd move and stop, move and stop. I sat down on the bumper of a truck and almost immediately went to sleep with my feet in the snow. That's when they froze. It was almost 24 hrs later that they began to hurt.

So that night and the next day we struggled up the mountain. I spent a good deal of the night kicking boys out of the snow so that they wouldn't freeze. Along in the afternoon we came to the top of the pass and horror of horrors we came to 50 or 60 more casualties. What to do—we resorted to the ones we had, kicked those off who could possibly walk and put others on. We left there about dusk and breezed on to Hagaru. We simply staggered in.

When we arrived my good friend Ken Halloway gave me a shot of whiskey, a Nembutal and put me to bed but best of all he said, "We'll take over." It was just like taking off a tight girdle it felt so good to be out from under those 900 ineffectuals.

The next day was a mad house. Everyone wanted to get on a plane and be evacuated. The organization wasn't too good and many were evac[ed] because they could get to the airstrip. But by noon we had emerged from our stupor a little and got the situation under control. We sent out 1026 [casualties] the first [day] and 1350 the next. I dozed and ate and slept most of those two days and nursed my feet, and by the 3rd day I felt almost human.

We moved again late in the afternoon of the 3rd day and spent all night on the road again and arrived at Koto-ri about dark the following day (8 miles). But again we waited while the boys fought through....

On the 3rd day we started again at daylight down the *big* mountain. And this morning about 2 am we arrived here in Hamhung. The military people in our organization tell me we made military history in fighting our way out (through 10 divisions so scuttle butt has it). But I wouldn't know about that. I was concerned about my part of it—getting those patients through in as good a shape as possible...

Love,
Jack⁶

* * *

Silver Star Dentist

Morton Silver served briefly as an Army draftee during World War II before graduating from the New York University School of Dentistry at age twenty-two. "I felt I was much too young to go into practice and had no business skills. So I joined the Navy. I never had a day's training in the Army, Navy, or the Marine Corps. It seems impossible, but it was so. I just fell through the cracks. To serve with the Marine Corps you had to receive field medical training; I never received that, and I was strictly on my own."

In 1948, Dr. Silver was nevertheless assigned to the Fifth Battalion Landing Team of the 1st Marine Division. "We were going to have a parade one day. Everybody shined up their uniforms. The parade was to take place on Sunday. On

Saturday evening Korea was invaded. Immediately, we marched in that parade in battle gear—steel helmets, weapons. We had no intention of parading in battle gear, but Korea had just broken and the Marines wanted to make a show.” He soon volunteered for Korean duty with the 5th Marines and saw action during the Inchon landing, Kimpo Airport, and the battle for Seoul. In the last days of November 1950, Dr. Silver and his comrades were fighting their way out of the Chinese trap at Chosin Reservoir.

I had a bag slung over my shoulder with a scalpel, a scissors, some forceps, and very little else. I don't think I ever used the forceps except once when I extracted an incisor on a Korean officer. I also carried morphine. The most important thing of all was that pair of scissors. I'm not joking. A scissors is most important. In fact, we didn't carry the scissors; we tied it around our waist so someone could never borrow it.

Once [Lt. Col. Ray] Murray caught me on the chow line without my carbine, and he demanded I carry a weapon. Every officer had to carry a weapon. So I got rid of the carbine and found a .45.

I didn't practice dentistry up there at Chosin. It was too serious a thing to worry about dentistry. Even so, we started getting men with fractured teeth. They were so hungry, and there was no way of heating up food. They would eat a cracker, open up a tin, and eat jelly. They also found Tootsie Rolls somewhere, a hell of a lot of Tootsie Rolls. When you put a frozen Tootsie Roll in your mouth it was like a rock. Yet the men wanted to get the taste, and they were smashing their teeth on them. If you had a tooth with a filling, forget it. The tooth was gone. Then the order went out: No more Tootsie Rolls.

It was getting colder and colder. One night, a jeep came in with its trailer. Inside were two wounded Chinese literally frozen into the trailer. We got them out and the colonel said to me, “Treat them.” As we bandaged them, they were smiling and laughing. And then we interrogated them. We knew already that we were up against Chinese. We were sitting like a sore thumb up in the mountains. The road was a simple road—one-way. You couldn't get two trucks on that damn road. And we were stuck there.

While we were there, some of the Army troops came streaming through us. They were in complete disarray. I'll never forget the colonel saying, “Where is your doctor? Where's your wounded?”

And the answer was, “We couldn't do anything. We were under attack.” And the colonel said, “Get them out of here. I don't want to talk to them [soldiers].” He wouldn't have anything to do with them because they abandoned their wounded.

On the retreat from the Chosin, we were walking along with a column of trucks. We tried to place a medical officer ahead, in the middle, and in the rear. I was

somewhere near the middle. Soon we came across a kid lying by the side of the road. People were just walking by him because they couldn't stand to look. His whole head was a mass of blood—one huge mass of blood. I looked at him and walked on. I must have walked a hundred and fifty feet when I realized I just couldn't leave him there. So I went back. No one would go near him; he was so bloody.

I took huge packs of gauze and cotton and started wiping it away because it had congealed. And then I started laughing. He had a massive cut inside his mouth that was bleeding like crazy. The wound wasn't even worth a Purple Heart. He was young and healthy and because it was freezing cold, he wasn't bleeding to death. After I wiped out the blood, I jammed some gauze into his mouth and told him to hold onto it. Finally, he came out like a human being with a cut inside his mouth. Were we happy! I sent him on his way.

As we worked our way back from Hagaru [ri], we found some Marines lying in a field who needed care. Most of them were frozen with frostbite and couldn't walk. Then the rumor went around that we were pulling out. These kids were frightened out of their wits. They asked me, "Doctor, what's going to happen to us?"

After we issued weapons to those who could handle them, I went to the colonel and said, "Colonel, what are we going to do? The men are panic-stricken and we have no way of getting them out."

The colonel looked at me and said, "Silver, you go back and tell them that if we can't get them out we're not going out."

That night they warned us that the artillery was going to open up—155mm, 75mm cannon, everything. They aimed into the surrounding hills where the Chinese were. They fired every round we had all night long. In the morning, they blew up the guns and tore up the tires. Now we had about forty large trucks that once held the ammo for that artillery, and we piled the wounded from that field in them like cordwood. There was no other way of describing it. Two chaplains assisted me. They were wonderful. My back was so bad I looked like the letter C. I was so bent over I couldn't stand up anymore.

When the column stopped during the day, we started a fire under a fifty-five-gallon drum of water. We threw all the C-ration cans in there and when they were warm we tossed them into the truck. The men who were conscious and alive enough would open the cans and feed everybody.

The roads were highly crowned and covered with snow and packed almost like ice. And the column was moving very slowly. We were coming into Koto-ri. Chesty Puller's outfit had established a perimeter, and we were passing through it. I was pretty much near the end of the convoy when suddenly a truck filled with wounded went over the side. I saw a kid pinned underneath with the truck on top of him. Apparently his steel helmet was holding the truck up. I didn't know what

the hell to do. A corpsman and I hauled the men out of the truck. There was primer cord in there and some kind of chlorine that was burning everybody. We took the men and dunked them in a nearby stream to get the stuff off. Even in that cold we found a stream with water running.

The question was how we were going to get this damn truck off the kid. I stood in the way and stopped the truck column. There weren't too many left, maybe a handful. A sergeant found a winch on one of them and we threw the cable over and hooked it onto the overturned truck. They moved it just enough to allow me to crawl underneath. I started pulling on the guy, the winch pulled the truck up a little more, and I yanked him free. The column then moved on.

The man had fractured legs. I took some stakes, put them between his legs, and wrapped them in a bundle. Fortunately, one of the chaplains came down the line and we were able to stop another truck. Even though all of them were filled to capacity with wounded, you could always shove somebody else in. There must have been eight or nine men from the vehicle that had gone over the side. We hauled them back onto the road and threw them onto the trucks. And that was the finish of the whole thing. I couldn't move anymore. They strapped me to the front fender of one of them, and that's how I rode into Koto-ri. I was young. I wasn't married. I was immortal. Furthermore, I wanted to win a medal. Of course, I didn't know I would get the Silver Star.

* * *

Corpsman Down

The fighting at Chosin Reservoir, which lasted two weeks, took a heavy toll on the Marines. They fell in droves from Chinese small arms and mortar fire or frostbite that left them helpless, unable to fight or walk without assistance. As in every war the Marines had ever fought in, hospital corpsmen shared their foxholes and risked their lives countless times a day. The corpsmen dragged Marines out of the line of fire, provided lifesaving aid, and tried to evacuate them to the rear. Second Lt. Joseph Owen, who commanded the 60mm mortars of Baker Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, is very appreciative. "Our corpsmen were a very special breed of people. When they become corpsmen they become fearless. I never saw those guys falter. We had utmost confidence in them. They took care of some real tough cases—and multiple cases at one time. You'd get into a fire fight and suddenly have five or six guys down at once. And they often had to do instant triages—make a decision just like that. Which guy is he going to take care of first, and how much time he is going to spend with him? You'll never see any Marine who won't tell you that the greatest people in the world are his corpsmen."

The Chosin Reservoir campaign offered the hospital corpsman unique and unwelcome challenges. Bill Davis, one of Owen's beloved "docs," quickly learned to make do with what he had with him. "I carried a box of morphine syrettes next to my belly underneath all the clothing I had on. And I carried four of those syrettes in my mouth when we were going into action. That would keep them from freezing and keep them pliable."

Corpsmen were unarmed and conspicuous on the frontlines, which often meant that few of these brave men would return from the Chosin campaign unscathed or survive it at all. Bill Davis tells his story.

I remember Thanksgiving very well. Actually, it was the day after Thanksgiving. We went out on a patrol on Thanksgiving Day and got back very late at night. It was pitch dark, but the field kitchen was still there. And it was very, very cold. It was not twenty degrees below but ten degrees lower than that. The company came back so the field kitchen opened up to feed us. They had tin trays and they put the turkey and mashed potatoes on there and everything immediately froze. I couldn't even eat the mashed potatoes; they were hard. But we did eat the rest of the stuff even though it was cold because it was a meal.

Bear in mind it was darker than pitch. Joe Owen and I went over and found a jeep. We turned the lights on and sat on the hood eating so we could see what we were doing. When we did that we were illuminated. I recall a shot ricocheting off the jeep. There was a sniper somewhere firing at us, and Joe and I just sat there eating our meal and didn't even bat an eye at that sniper who really had poor aim.

We could see the Reservoir. It looked like a big ice skating rink. When we were in Hagaru [ri], it was right there. We walked on it in the course of moving up to some hill somewhere.

At that time we began moving in battalion as opposed to company because we had lost so many people. We were bivouacked on a hill, and Baker Company was sent out to make a reconnaissance on what we were going to do the next day. We went out into a valley. The Chinese were in the hills, and this was the first time they attacked us. They had mortar emplacements, had aimed them, and found out where they were going to land. Then they began throwing heavy automatic weapons and mortars at us.

We saw the enemy trying to attack down the side of a hill to overrun us, but they didn't make it because we had enough firepower to drive them back. The first line had weapons and the second and third line didn't. And the fourth line had weapons. So the second and third lines were attacking head-on and would pick up the weapons from the casualties in front of them. There were dead Chinese all over

the place. They were armed with burp guns and even Thompson submachine guns. I don't know where they got those.

Eventually Charlie Company came up and helped us get out of there but we were there for hours under fire. I had five guys behind an outcropping of rock I had treated and was with them when somebody yelled, "Corpsman!"

So I got up to go and when I did, three of these guys got up to follow me. I turned around and said, "Stay there. I'm just going out to attend to another casualty. I'll be back." When I was in the process of hollering at them, a mortar shell went off right in front of me. All the shrapnel went through my open mouth and the side of my face, plus many other places on my body.

But there were more casualties and I had to take care of them. But before I could do that, I stopped first to put a bandage on. Now putting a bandage on inside the mouth is very difficult. I turned one of the bandages inside out, cut it, and then folded it in half so there would be gauze on both sides and stuffed it inside my mouth. That stopped some of the bleeding. My other wounds were in my chest, arms, and legs, but I was still functional. Then I took care of some casualties. The other guys, realizing I was in bad shape, helped out. By then Charlie Company showed up and some of their corpsmen took care of some of our people.

They took me back on a truck to Company C of the med battalion, and they put me next to the potbellied stove in the little dwelling they were using. After a while I told them they would have to move me because it was thawing out my feet and they were hurting like hell.

I was only there overnight, and the next morning an artillery observation airplane like a Piper Cub flew in and landed in the road beside the medical company. Then they loaded me aboard, but the door wouldn't close because the stretcher stuck out. The plane had a black Army pilot. I'd never seen a black Army pilot before. It didn't matter to me. He was going to get me the hell out of there. They ended up tying the door to the end of the stretcher so it wouldn't flap around. He took off from the road and flew me back to a MASH unit because they had oral surgeons there.

That flight was colder than hell! The wind was blowing right in through the open door. Even though he wasn't flying very high, the ground temperature was thirty below zero! The flight was less than thirty minutes long, and I ended up very close to Hamhung.

They debrided the wound and took out lots of metal that was in my mouth and did some bandaging. They were also going to do some surgery to keep the facial tissue together. I had a hole in the roof of my mouth that went up into my sinus on the left side.

From there I went to the Fukuoka Army Hospital. Fortunately, I was only there three days before they flew me to Yokosuka and things got back to normal.

Actually it wasn't normal because there were twenty-six hundred patients there. These were the casualties from the Chosin Reservoir. My place in the hospital was in the corpsmen's quarters. The nurses' quarters was a ward and the hospital was a ward. The passageways were a ward. Even the auditorium was filled with patients. Prior to evacuation back to the states, my bed was on the stage of the auditorium. The staff lived in the caves which the Japanese had built around the hospital. They cared for me very well as they did for all casualties in what was a crowded and confusing environment.

The same great care was duplicated as I was returned to the States and ultimately to the Philadelphia Naval Hospital. They didn't do anything for my frostbite at Yokosuka, but did so when I got back to Philadelphia Naval Hospital, where I stayed for six months. I was on an ear, nose, and throat ward right next door to a ward where they had forty-two patients. At least forty of those were frostbite patients. There were six different types of treatment going on at the same time. They didn't know how to treat them. You would find a guy in a bed with a heat cradle over the top of his feet, with a light in there to warm them. You would go down two beds and there was a guy with an icepack on his feet. Two more beds down you'd see a patient with nothing but a fan blowing on his feet. It was hit and miss.

I didn't get any treatment for my frostbite because mine didn't bother me. It bothered me in later years, though. I lost my toe nails and to this day they keep falling off. I still had feeling in my feet so I wasn't a real candidate for treatment.

I still have shrapnel in my chest. It turned out that a fragment about the size of my thumbnail had worked its way down behind the sternum, where it resides to this day. Fortunately, it's covered in scar tissue so it doesn't move, and hasn't since 1951.

I still have five pieces in my face. They took the tissue from the right side of the roof of my mouth and flopped it over to the left side of my mouth where this big hole was. And that's how they closed up the hole. Then they made me a plastic denture—a guard—which I wore all the time until the flap began to heal and was strong enough. I was on a liquid diet for four months! Back in 1951, the normal liquid diet was Jello, soup, and milkshakes, period. After that I ended up weighing eighty-five pounds.

The fragments in my face don't bother me. I had some in my leg and arm that came out by working their way to the surface. We just plucked them out. I should say that this mouth wound took out the whole left inside of my face. It took the gum, the bone, and the teeth so there was just a great big hole there. Before I got out of the Philadelphia Naval Hospital, they made a prosthesis for me but I couldn't eat on that side. They couldn't replace the gum or bone. In fact, it was seventeen years later, in 1967, that an oral surgeon at Bethesda [National Naval Medical Center] did a bone and tissue transplant to give me gum and bone in the left side of my mouth.

* * *

Circling the Wagons

Like Bill Davis, the corpsman who took care of his men, 2nd Lt. Joe Owen's appreciation of Navy medicine is genuine and comes from firsthand experience.

We were like a reinforced rifle platoon and by that time down to about fifty people. We were on a company-sized patrol on 27 November, and the Chinese surrounded us about five miles from the battalion perimeter. We just circled the wagons and were waiting for them to come at us that night. We were running out of ammo. [Edmond] Mickens and Bill Davis formed their own temporary aid station in the middle of our perimeter with the Chinese shooting in at us.

Mickens got it fairly early. They had him stretched out. Bill Davis was trying to take care of him. One of my men directed a stretcher detail and he was going all over the place picking up bodies. They took them to where Davis was treating the wounded. We lost two platoon sergeants, and the skipper got hit through the mouth. Bill Davis was leading a walking wounded guy and was trying to get him over to where the stretchers were. As he did so, he took a piece of shrapnel through the mouth and couldn't talk. He tried to keep working but after a while he couldn't and they put him down. I don't know whether anybody took care of the wounded after that.

I remember one morning after we had gotten into Hagaru [ri], we got a replacement corpsman. The gunny told him, "Just stick by me and then when you hear a guy start yelling 'corpsman,' you go to where they're yelling 'corpsman.'" That was that guy's indoctrination because we started moving out right away.

On the 8th of December, we had the point for the division. We were down to about 30 men of our original 215 plus maybe another 100 replacements who had come to us over two campaigns. Our skipper had just been killed. There were three lieutenants left. [1st Lt. Chew-Een] Lee took over. He got hit in twenty minutes. The Chinese were up on a hill and we had to make a frontal assault on them. I was leading the assault. For a while we had a tank but that pulled off. I had [Pfc. Attilio] Lupacchini with me and the two of us were forward. Lupacchini was right next to me and he went down fast. And then I got nailed. A couple of Gooks popped up from behind a hill a little ways from me. One had a rifle, the other a burp gun. The guy with the rifle got me in my left side, the burp gunner got me on the right side. I went down in the snow. I think I got two or three rounds from the burp gun; I'm not sure. But it blew out my elbow and most of the nerves. The pain was awful. I was also spitting blood all over the place. Later I found out that when the bullet entered my upper left shoulder and came out my back, it knocked off part of the

scapular bone. In doing so, it nicked my lung. That's why a lot of people thought I was dead when they saw me lying beside the road. The whole front of me was covered with blood.

[Cpl. Eugene M.] Morrisroe was coming up right behind me and he saw those Chinese. He shot the Chinese rifleman with his M1 and somebody else got the burp gunner, perhaps [Cpl. Merwin] Perkins. When Morrisroe got up to where the dead Chinese rifleman was, he saw him holding a new clip of .25 caliber ammo in his hand. He was about to reload because the round he got me with was the last one in the clip [in his rifle]. As he went by, Morrisroe took that fresh clip of ammo from the Chinese and saved it as a souvenir. Many years later, he gave it to me and I have it framed on my wall.

After I got shot, the corpsman who got to me was a replacement who had just joined us that day. I don't know who he was. He was the only one with us who had a clear, shaven face and a clean parka. He stood out because he was so new. He didn't know what the hell was going on.

The fire was very heavy yet this kid came up about a hundred yards, under that fire, across a snowy hill to get to me. Then he threw himself down beside me. Bullets were whizzing just a few inches overhead. As he lay beside me, I yelled at him to give me some morphine and he said he couldn't. "I can't, sir. It's frozen."

And then I really took off at him. "Put it in your mouth and keep it liquid. Don't you boots know anything?" Then I realized this kid has come up under fire to save my life, and I'm chewing him out.

After a while the morphine melted and he gave me the jab. I'll never forget chewing him out after what he had just done. I was ashamed of myself. I'd give anything to find that lad and thank him. Of the twenty-seven people who survived our company, not one of them knows what happened to that corpsman. He was the second one we had in two days. The first had been killed the previous day, and no one even knew who he was.

There was a lot of confusion about how I got down off the hill. What we did with casualties was to open up a poncho or shelter half and put the guy on it. Then we slid him down on the snow. That saved a four-man carry. Two or three guys claimed to have taken me down and put me in a ditch.

By this time I was in and out of it with the morphine. I woke up once and a huge tank was chuffing away. I wondered if he knew I was there and was afraid he'd run over me.

Anyway, I was down in the ditch and coming in and out of consciousness. I had sent [Cpl. Robert] Kelly, my runner, back earlier to take what was left of our 60s [mortars]. He came down the road and saw me there. I guess there were a lot of casualties around. A crackerbox ambulance was sitting on the road with a couple of corpsmen in it getting warm. You couldn't blame them for that. They'd been working hard that day. Kelly went up and told them he had a bad casualty. When

the corpsmen gave him a hard time, Kelly shoved his carbine into the ambulance. That convinced them to load me aboard. The ambulance held four. I remember one guy screaming for morphine and another guy telling him to quit his bitchin'. I wanted some morphine, too, but the corpsman told me he couldn't give me any until we got back to the aid station.

I remember being carried into the aid station, a huge canvas affair with bright lights. People began stripping and doing things to me. I woke up a couple of times with guys moaning. The corpsmen were wearing scarves around their faces. They were all in their parkas, all wrapped up. It was cold. I remember looking up and seeing plasma and wondering if it was going to freeze.

I ended up in an Army field hospital in an old schoolhouse. When I woke up, I saw high windows and then this beautiful, beautiful woman only inches from my face. She looked like an Irish colleen with black hair and blue eyes. I thought I was dead and in heaven, and I figured she was an angel. My first thought was, "I made it." I never thought *I* would make it to heaven. Then I wondered how my wife Dorothy would find out I was dead.

It turned out she was checking my vital signs. After that, two giant black guys carried me on a stretcher to a plane. One of them kept telling me, "You're going to be all right, man. You're going to be all right now." He said, "The Air Force takes care of you now." So they flew me out of Korea.

When I woke up, it was like a nightmare. Brueghel could have painted this scene. It was a big, open room like a gymnasium with cots all over the place and people moaning and screaming. I noticed that the blankets were brown, and then I heard someone yelling, "Medic!" It was an Army hospital. At that time, the Army had not performed well up where we were fighting and I had little respect for them. I guess that translated into my thinking. I was indignant that I was in an Army hospital. I yelled out for a corpsman. I didn't want some medic taking care of me. I wanted a corpsman.

I was only in that Army hospital at Otsu for a day or so. And when I woke up, I was being pushed into the junior officers' ward at the naval hospital in Yokosuka. That's a scene that should be captured. All the passageways there at Yokosuka were lined with cots. There were guys sitting or smoking or walking around. Those were mainly the walking wounded. Guys badly wounded like me were in rooms in beds. It was the same in the junior officers' ward. A nurse came in. We called her "Nurse Gunny." She was some tough cookie, but I love her to this day.

When they brought me to Yokosuka, I learned that I also had frostbite. I hadn't realized that. I must have gotten it after I was wounded and lying in the ditch. Even though it was a mild case, it upset me greatly. To me, avoiding frostbite was a function of discipline. You could always hear the NCOs and junior officers yelling,

“Keep your toes moving.” When you’re pinned down, you just had to remember to keep the pieces moving. And I hadn’t done that after I got wounded. I do remember waking up with that tank over my head and remembering to wiggle my toes. I had the thought, “Jeez, an officer getting frostbite.”

The day after I got to Yokosuka, Japanese orderlies took me through innumerable passageways into an examining room. I was just coming out of a haze and saw three Navy doctors. They were looking at a light board with x-rays on it. I heard one say, “We can’t do anything with this arm.”

Then a big Navy captain said, “Gentlemen, I guess the only thing we can do is amputate.”

And I thought, “Some poor bastard is going to get something amputated. I lifted my head up a little bit to see what poor bastard was going to have something cut off. And then I realized that I was alone. Suddenly it dawned that they were talking about me! When I heard him say “amputate,” I sat up as far as I could and said, “Fuck you! You’re not amputatin’ anything off me.” As you know, you don’t say that to a Navy captain.

He came over and said, “Lieutenant, you just have to face facts and realize that there’s not much we can do.”

I said, “I’ve got to get back to my troops. I can’t get back to my troops if I don’t have an arm.” Getting back to my troops was always in my head.

He patted me a few times and then turned to the other two doctors and said, “Gentlemen, with this kind of spirit, let’s see what happens. We’ve got enough work here. If they want to take it off back in the States . . . let’s see if they’ll work with him.” So they all nodded their heads and that’s why they didn’t cut my arm off.

What got him was what I said about getting back to my troops. That was just as sincere as any thought I’ve ever had in my life. All I could think of was, “They need me.” And I couldn’t go back if I didn’t have my arm.

I remember some time after that when a doctor came in to check my arm. They had me in a half cast by that time. It was awful; I couldn’t even look at it. I asked what he thought. He said, “I’m not the guy you should ask. I’m only here to get it cleaned up and make sure you don’t have any infection spreading.”

I said, “Well, tell me what’s going to happen? When are we gonna start getting this thing going?”

He said, “You want to talk to a nerve man or a bone doctor?”

“But I’m talking to you.”

He said, “This isn’t my line.”

“What’s your line?”

He said, “I’m a pediatrician.”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

He said, "That's what I'd like to know."

A couple of weeks before he was probably taking care of little babies. Now he was taking care of big babies. He was one of the few people I ran into in that whole hospital who didn't seem to put himself out for you. He was feeling sorry for himself. It seems that some of those doctors had been yanked right out of wherever they were.

After that, the nurses and corpsmen encouraged me to eat and do things. The nurses were so kind. The walking wounded wanted to get back to Korea. Most of us were regulars. The problem the nurses and doctors had there was trying to keep these guys subdued because all they wanted to do was get back on the line.

When I left Yokosuka, I went out on a gurney, and they stopped me at the nurses' station. "Nurse Gunny" came out, held my hand, and kissed me. And they were all like that. They were beautiful to us. And the corpsmen. I had problems with some of them back in the States but those corpsmen at Yokosuka were great.

We got to the Army hospital at Tripler and that was like paradise. It was a beautiful place. By this time I was half-casted. There was nothing medically significant at Tripler except they were so good to us. They kept bringing us fruit, flowers. The windows were open and I could look out over the ocean.

I ended up at the naval hospital in St. Albans [New York]. I believe a Capt. James, who I think was a neurosurgeon, came into my room and gave me an extensive examination. I had a severed ulnar nerve. The doctors in the x-ray room said it looked to them like a bombed-out railroad yard with the tracks all shot up. Dr. James prodded me with pins and I couldn't feel anything. He could have been jumping up and down on my arm for all I knew. It had no feeling whatsoever. He told me that I would have to learn to do things with my left hand and start adjusting to a new way of doing things. At that time, I thought I would be going back to duty. I just knew something was going to bring this arm back.

A few days later there was a flag inspection and the admiral came in with a huge staff and Capt. James. I happened to be sitting on my sack at that time writing a letter. Capt. James pointed that out to the admiral. "Just look at the spirit of these Marines. I just talked to him the other day about learning how to do things with his other hand."

And the admiral said, "Do you mind if I take a look at what you're writing, lieutenant?" So he saw my handwriting and said, "You're off to a very good start." I didn't have the heart to tell him I was left-handed, and he never found out.

My arm never came back so I could go to full duty, or any duty at all. When I finally realized I was going to have an arm that would not function, I was prepared for it and didn't whine or wonder how I was going to live with a disability when I got out.

I'd get terribly frustrated learning to cut meat and had the corpsman do it for me. And that was terrible having to have someone do that for me. For a long time afterward, I didn't go to restaurants because I'd have to ask the waiter to have my meat cut.

I was in the hospital a year and half and, by the time I got out, I was acclimated to what I had. Maybe, too, there were guys a lot worse than I was. Nobody sat around saying, "I feel sorry for you" or "You've got it tough." There was no quarter given. That was the great thing about it.

While I was at St. Albans, I had a series of operations—exploratories and patching the bones together, and fixing the nerves. They also took me to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. One of the leading hand specialists in the world, a Dr. Carroll, did a lot of work on me. After I was surveyed out of the Marine Corps, I kept exercising and, a couple of years later, my arm started to improve drastically. They had put me on a regimen of constant exercise when I was in the hospital and that stayed with me. I always carried a little rubber ball around and squeezed it. I began to get feeling in my hand and noticed I could make some movements.

I was in New York on business once—about 1954—and went to the Naval Hospital and asked them to take a look. I went back in for two operations and there was a drastic improvement in my hand. Now you can see I have a pretty good hand! It became a challenge for me to do things and I give the credit to those people who never, ever gave me the soft treatment. I think they sensed that a guy like me needed tough treatment. When I think of my time in naval hospitals, I think of how fortunate I was. As long as I had to get shot, thank God I had the naval hospitals to take care of me.

The 7.62mm burp gun slugs that hit Owen during the withdrawal from Koto-ri caused a compound comminuted fracture of his right ulna and radius at the elbow joint resulting in an ulnar and median nerve injury. The .25 caliber (6.5mm) rifle bullet, fired from a World War II Japanese rifle, entered above his left shoulder and exited his chest. This produced a compound comminuted fracture of the left scapula, a far less serious wound.

* * *

Flight Nurse Under Fire

Lillian Keil was a veteran Air Force flight nurse, having earned four Battle Stars for her service in Europe during World War II—Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, northern France, and the Rhineland. When the Korean War broke out, she was working as a stewardess for United Airlines based in San Francisco. In June 1950, 1st Lt. Keil quit United and picked up where she left off, flying to Tokyo as an Air Force flight nurse. Although headquartered in Japan, her beat was everywhere that Air Force evacuation aircraft flew in Korea.

Her first evac flights took place during the Inchon-Seoul operations in September 1950. As the Chosin drama unfolded and casualties mounted, Air Force and Marine aircraft stood by awaiting the completion of the primitive landing strip at the besieged village of Hagaru-ri. To build this airstrip, Marine Corps engineers gouged the frozen earth using high explosives and bulldozers with steel teeth welded to their blades. When this herculean task was completed, Air Force C-47s of the Combat Cargo Command's 801st Squadron—the "Kyushu Gypsies"—and several Marine R4Ds began unloading precious supplies and evacuating the most seriously wounded and frostbitten cases. By 6 December, more than four thousand men had been evacuated from Hagaru-ri's frozen airstrip. And all these feats of construction and evacuation were accomplished under fire; the Chinese occupied the hills just beyond the Marines' perimeter. Flight nurse Keil recalls the vivid memories.

Hagaru [ri] was surrounded on three sides by mountains, and it depended upon the weather as to what approach we could make. When we got there, we would unload whatever we had brought in for the troops—military supplies, gasoline, oil, rations, clothing, shells—whatever the fighting man needed. Air-evac always carried military supplies to the forward areas. On some flights the whole airplane was full of five-gallon cans of gasoline. And there were a lot of times we also carried as many fifty-gallon oil drums as we could get on the airplane. The little port holes had to be left open [because of the fumes]. If they were closed, and there was a spark, the gasoline would explode, and everybody would be lost.

There was no doctor aboard our flights, only a medical technician and a flight nurse. The patients were in critical situations, and we had to be very careful. The planes weren't pressurized. We didn't maintain a high altitude because the altitude affected the head cases.

We flight nurses carried a blanket bag, a duffel bag about two feet across and about two and a half feet long. We also had blankets. There were several times when I had a flight suit made of lamb's wool inside, and pants. I covered the patients who were shivering with the cold with my flight jacket or took off my flight pants and put those over them.

On most flights into Hagaru [ri] we heard the gunfire. There was only one approach we could make. It was touch-and-go for the pilots if the weather was bad. Fortunately, I never saw bullets flying through the plane, but I heard the rumble [of artillery].

There was one flight I remember very well. Everybody was scared. We didn't even know whether or not we would be able to get in because of the weather. It was really touch-and-go and kind of difficult for the pilots because it was their first trip in. I know that when we landed, we landed very short and they wouldn't

let me out of the plane. We picked up our patients and then took off as soon as we were loaded.

Whenever the door was open, I could see out. There was nothing but snow and slush. GIs were running around, and military equipment was being off-loaded. There was a lot of frantic work being accomplished in order to get the plane off again. As the plane was unloaded we would take down the litter straps and get ready to take aboard whatever patients they had for us. We could accommodate twenty-four litter patients.

A corpsman would set up the ramp and then carry the wounded aboard on a stretcher. I had an extra stretcher handy, and would have the corpsman transfer the patient to the clean stretcher. Then, from the doorway, we would shake out the old stretcher and blankets and put the patient back on it. Some of them had a lot of dirt under their necks; some didn't have many clothes on, just a blanket. But that little thing we did was something they really appreciated.

It was horrible. Some of the boys were wet, others were in great pain. And others were shivering from the cold. There was one trip I remember when the boys came aboard in just their stocking feet. These fellows left their shoes behind for those who needed them badly. And it was so cold.

The guys were very happy to see me. Even as bad as everything was, they would smile and say, "It's so wonderful to see an American woman." It made me feel good. We worked hard, but if a wounded GI smiled at us, it was a beautiful sight. Let me put it this way. When you got a load of patients, it didn't matter who they were or what their wounds. You had a load of wounded personnel who were in pain. Even so, they were happy. All of a sudden it was, "Oh, we're going home. We are getting out of here."

As soon as the plane was loaded we took off. Then another plane, right behind us, landed as we took off and picked up more patients. Right away, the most important thing was to get the men into position on the airplane. We couldn't do much about treating them until we got the door closed and started looking around to see who needed help the most. Most of them would have had medic first aid. The corpsmen would have put an "MS" on the foreheads of the patients to let us know that they had received morphine. If a patient had had a gunshot wound in the thigh, for example, the clothing would be torn at that point so that the corpsman could get to the wound. It was bloody, muddy, dirty, smelly, everything. But you just had to ignore that and check the bandages to see if the wound was bleeding. There was not much more we could do but provide the quick aids and whatever the person needed.

We couldn't wash their wounds but we did have sterile saline solution. If there was a great deal of bleeding and there was a lot of dirt in the wound, we got our sponges and used the saline. Sometimes we just dropped a saline pad

on top of the wound after I cleansed it. But most of that work had already been done. Many of these boys were going to rear echelons and MASH hospitals to have surgery.

There was very little we could do for the frostbite patients except keep them warm. With frostbite, you'd think the patient would be in a lot of pain but that wasn't the case. We simply covered them with blankets.

From Hagaru [ri] we flew back to the first airfield with facilities for medical care or surgery. We left those patients there and then went back to get more. If that airfield was already filled to capacity with wounded, we went to another facility. Maybe in a day or so, depending upon our schedule, we went back to one of these airfields, picked up patients, and brought them to Japan.

A few patients stand out in my mind. I remember one boy who had gotten frostbite and now had black stumps for fingers. Another, whose face was practically eliminated, nevertheless asked for a pencil and paper. I have that paper in front of me right now. I've saved it all these years. He wrote, "Do you think I will live? Will I get to go home? When we get to the hospital please tell them to...." He overwrote the first words and I can't make them out.

Well, here it is fifty years later and I sometimes ask myself if I was really there. Occasionally I feel that I have probably seen it all in a movie. Nevertheless, I really enjoyed putting my whole heart into my work. I thought it was the most wonderful thing to be where I was, flying and taking care of all those boys.

Notes

¹Bullae are liquid-filled, and in this case, frozen elevations on the skin.

²According to Corpsman Herbert Renner, "The enemy—North Korean and Chinese troops—were called 'Gooks' (or 'Luke the Gook') collectively, along with anyone else who supported their side, including the Russians or any other communists. The word 'Gook' had no ethnic origin, was coined long before ethnic correctness was in vogue, and was not meant to be denigrating to those to which it was directed. It was entirely a military word disassociated with civilian life invented by warriors who had to fight the enemy."

³Lessenden's wife Edith recalls her late husband elaborating on the destruction of gear. "They were to destroy everything, except for small items they could put in a pocket or hang around their necks. They built a big bonfire, well doused with gasoline and oil and threw everything on it. For example, Chet threw in his personal possessions, his leather suitcase, and his Bausch and Lomb binoculars, which had been my Christmas gift the previous year, and a bundle of my letters. The only things he kept were his surgeon's tools, packaged in a Marine-green canvas roll-up, the medical supply of blood, which he wore next to his skin to keep it from freezing, his 35mm camera, and a few rolls of film."

⁴Edith Lessenden continues, "All during the retreat down the mountain was the ubiquitous background growl of heavy engines of ambulances, jeeps, etc. For months after returning home, Chet got a rush of adrenaline every time he heard the sound of a heavy engine. He used to joke about it, saying he was just like Pavlov's dog."

⁵Lt. Col., now Maj. Gen. Ray Murray (retired), commanding officer of the 5th Marines, was consumed with the responsibility of leading his troops out of the Chosin trap. Nevertheless, he vividly recalls this incident. “He [Lessenden] was in a hut and there was a huge pot of some kind that belonged to the people who lived there. They built a fire under it and were thawing C-rations in it to give to the wounded. He and the other doctors worked day and night to take care of these people. I don’t know when they slept.”

⁶Lessenden was “Les” to his regimental commander, “Chet” to his wife, and “Jack” to his father.

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