A Writing Life
Weintraub, Stanley

Published by ELT Press

Weintraub, Stanley.
A Writing Life: Revisiting the Past.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/77280.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/77280
Chapter 5
War in the Wards
1952–1953

Although I would publish a brief, cautious account with a major imprint, the memorable mini-war that I chronicled decades ago has otherwise nearly escaped history. I was still under security oversight. The prisoner of war mutinies and their suppression have been linked almost exclusively to the dreaded Korean island Alcatraz of Koje. I was there only once, long after the headlined events.

My pile of note-pad pages written daily in a tiny script that I can barely now decipher detail our local war—an episode of six weeks, concluded violently on June 7, 1952. What happened then is now difficult to believe, even for a participant. Like other officers with orders to Korea, I had signed a security form that I would not keep a diary. As a flimsy evasion I wrote only on scraps of paper. A self-censored version was published as *The War in the Wards* in 1964; an augmented but still incomplete text appeared in 1976. Most names were then altered for privacy but few then involved now survive.

At 3:45 in the afternoon on April 15, 1952 all prisoner work details were hurried back to their secure compounds. As they were returning under guard, a sound truck with portable generator on a trailer rolled up to the main gate of our Compound One, holding the battle wounded. Prisoners clustered behind the barbed wire to listen curiously to blared announcements in Korean and in Chinese. “Screening” would begin the next morning to separate those who wished to be returned when peace came from those who would “forcibly resist repatriation.” Their own commands had promised, according to the loudspeakers, that there would be no retaliation against any returnee—even those with tattooed anti-Communist slogans. “Think of your families and
friends at home, and what you will be leaving behind.” The alternative—to choose not to return—was to furnish safety to those—hopefully few—who feared repatriation. Too many POWs left on our hands would embarrass the other side and create difficulty negotiating an end to the war and an exchange of prisoners. We did not want a glut of POWs. No one would be persuaded to stay.

The two thousand or so wounded prisoners listened sullenly, then drifted back to their huts. The sound truck went on to each bleak, desolate compound, with word-of-mouth messages passing so quickly from ward to ward that by Compound Three—thousands of mostly belligerent amputees—those who were somehow mobile began hobbling away as soon as the recorded announcement began. Further pauses at compound gates found the loudspeakers blaring at hostile, unseen audiences—a foreshadowing of defiance.

When darkness came, we expected trouble overnight. Prisoners of contrary persuasions had considered the rumored outcome for days. News traveled fast. Screening had already begun on the big prison island of Koje, with predictably violent response. Since on the mainland we had ten thousand POW patients among our twenty thousand or more behind barbed wire, the sick-and-wounded element limited, we hoped, the likelihood of mutiny and bloodshed. Yet we knew that we were a message center. POW leaders communicated stealthily with their political and military authorities in the north through both “patients” faking symptoms and exchanges sent in through the barbed wire by villagers on the outside or out by co-opted ROK guards. The enemy command intended to prevent prisoners in embarrassing numbers from staying South. Further, the strategy of chaos would create the illusion, worldwide, that we were violating international law mandating repatriation and inflicting cruelties on helpless prisoners.

At 6:30 AM on April 16 all POWs in the Headquarters Compound, where able-bodied laborers were lodged close to the hospital wards, were marched to remote Compound Ten where they were screened one-by-one. The few—about five percent—who chose “South” were to remain. Lined up, the others after interrogation were loaded into huge, heavily guarded dock-bound open trucks for ferrying to Koje, which was to be restricted, after screening, to die-hard future returnees. As the first convoy of about 1,700 began to move out into the hills,
the prisoners aboard began to chant, in Korean: “We’ve won the victory; now we’re going home.” They waved previously concealed, prison-made, North Korean and hammer-and-sickle flags. Distant Koje, we learned, was already approaching near-anarchy. To bolster security there, combat troops were being transferred from the line.

Screening continued through the day as prisoners were escorted beyond the sally ports, one-by-one, to be asked “North” or “South.” If they responded, they were guided in opposite directions for relocation. Stubborn silence was deemed “North.” As eighty litter-borne cases were being removed from Two, the winds increased. Clouds of choking dust swirled, obscuring nearly everything but a lofted North Korean flag, apparently fashioned from a bed sheet. Amid the howling gusts, Red leaders materialized from the ranks, refusing to permit further screening. One honcho shouted warnings at the sally port that fifty patients suspected to opt “South” were being held back as hostages until all interrogation ceased. Refusing to force the issue, an MP colonel moved the screening party on to another compound.

Two bright red and purple flags with red stars in a white circle rose above the dust clouds in Three. As stolen and long-concealed medicines came in a variety of hues, POW amputees and laborers there could apply their crafts to flaunt us. Avoiding trouble, the screeners continued to Seven, which housed nine hundred-plus women—hardened fighters and camp-followers. As their processing began, and onlookers queuing up shouted political slogans, POW workmen on our order dug in a double barbed wire divider sectioning the compound into North and South. Gathering by the fence in the “North” sector, die-hards sang Red Army songs while those already on the “South” side jeered. But blood would inevitably bleed red.

Late in the long afternoon, troops led by Dick Doerrmann, a fellow Pennsylvanian in command of Three, riskily taking advantage of the billowing dust, broke in to seize the Red flags. “Communists mass,” I wrote, “throw rocks, swing clubs, surround them. G.I.s dash to Six’s [linking] gate, then escape when ROK soldiers, bayonets fixed, rush into Three from opposite [sally port] gate. Two G.I.s beaten badly enough to need medical treatment.” By order, unauthorized incursions would not happen again.
Emboldened, hard-core Reds gathered, shouting in Korean: “Victory! Victory! We won the war and we want to go home!” It became a common refrain. In a sonic frenzy they roared North Korean and Red Army anthems:

All the other compounds hear the singing, carried on the fierce gusts, and join in the chant. It grows louder and echoes back from the hills, sounding eerie as it is distorted by the wind’s howling and whistling. Buttoned up in field jacket I watch the tumult from the plateau above. Twilight comes early, as the dust clouds whipped up obscure the sunset.

Aware of the consequences of being trapped unscreened, sixty pro-South POWs escaped after dark from Two while rioters were distracted and sympathetic guards looked away. From the plateau above Three, adjacent to Six, one could see, helplessly, a group of pro-North vigilantes hanging a prisoner accused of seizing a defiant flag. Fearfully, 244 anti-Red POWs soon massed at the sally port to Six and pleaded to be released. ROK guards escorted them in darkness to Eleven, which was being prepared for pro-South prisoners.

Early on April 17, a Thursday, screeners were refused entrance to Two, and at One the POW honcho at the sally port declared: “There will be no screening. We’re all going back to North Korea!” Under orders to us, no force was employed. The screening party with armed guards went on to Six, assuming that three thousand advanced tuberculosis patients there would put up little resistance. As TB was as prevalent in Korea as the common cold, tuberculars who were hospitalized had to be very sick indeed, yet they were far from listless and had die-hard POW laborers with them to egg on those not entirely bedridden.

At nine that morning it was as dark as twilight. The wind howled and whipped up the dry fields beyond into a grey-green veil of dust. We knew there were bodies in the wards, murdered or dead of disease, but I would not permit Digger Moore, my all-purpose morgue clerk, and his unarmed crew inside, for it was obvious that the mutineers were eager for hostages. As Six and Three were contiguous, a strategic blunder committed months before when the enclosures were erected in haste, the extremists in Three were already the overlords in Six, and large, formerly concealed North Korean, Chinese, and Soviet flags flew.

Entering an apparently unpopulated ward with armed G.I.s to look around, I saw a large portrait of Stalin in an emptied hut. We left hastily
and I mentioned the obscenity to a moronic senior officer peering in. “So what?” he said. “I have a picture of Truman.”

Four and Two were also adjacent, another prescription for disorder; yet while POWs in Two resisted screening and protested, the processing of Four went on into darkness under garish portable floodlights, which seemed to intimidate trouble. It was the first completely successful operation, perhaps because so many prisoners were enfeebled by wounds. A memorable scene I witnessed went into my notes: “Two young Korean brothers part ways in the screening tent [beyond the sally port], one to go North, the other to stay South. They shook hands, American style, and went their ways separately.” It suggested a scene out of our Civil War. About 70% went North, the others South.

It was already late—we were foregoing dinner—when screening closed and the floodlights were switched off. Exhausted, I returned to my cot in Hut 8 and opened a paperback edition of a recent Broadway comedy—The Happy Time. It seemed to take place on another planet.

In the early morning of April 18, we heard POWs in Three apparently breaking down their wooden huts, a peculiar defiance as it left them without shelter. We assumed that they were separating lumber for setting fires, or for fashioning crude weapons. When tanks and half-tracks ventured by, prisoners threw dug-up rocks over the barbed wire. Our orders were to take cover, not to retaliate, and not to enter any compound resisting screening, even if it meant being unable to treat the sick and wounded. As usual, by dawn the dead were abandoned at sally port gates, where food was left for POWs to distribute themselves—or leave. More flags were flying, crudely made in the wards from tincture of gentian violet and bright red merthiolate, medications easy to store and conceal. By afternoon the POWs had not wearied of shouting Red Army songs and had refused their food. We assumed that they had long stockpiled dry rations.

In One, POWs seemingly on the edge of insanity were busy trashing interior medical facilities, including their own X-rays. Medics, they were warned by bullhorn, would cease care. A prisoner spokesman shouted that they preferred death. About sixty hoping to choose South clustered anxiously at the gate, and were escorted under guard to a refugee compound, where they began waving crude ROK flags they had concealed.
Useless negotiations continued day after day at the gates to closed wards. Die-hards insisted that all prisoners who had escaped had to return to pick up their chop-bowls, medical charts and clothing, but it was obvious that it was an invitation to be beaten or killed. As dusk came each day more POWs came to their gates pleading for release. Most had abandoned their medical records in their haste to be liberated. Carrying one’s charts exposed intent to flee.

In Six, thousands of far-advanced tuberculosis cases, most, having refused rations, were now too weak to resist, and interrogations proceeded as POW litter bearers carried each prisoner beyond the barbed wire to a screening tent. In adjacent Three, with 1,600 combat casualties, we watched most die-hards hobbling with difficulty, yet organized into disciplined squads, platoons and companies. In a defiant parade, some were on crutches, some with legs in casts; many were amputees walking, propped by sticks, on wooden pylons or mere stumps.

Every prisoner not bedridden seemed in the march of the maimed, waving Communist flags, banners and standards, or displaying paper “floral” wreaths in red and yellow. A grotesque, almost funereal procession, complete to mournful dirges alternating with Red Army chants, the spectacle of mass irrationality unwound for two hours in dust-blown mid-afternoon. Seen from the plateau above Three, the parade of the maimed appeared unbelievably eerie—like a waking nightmare.

When early dusk came, the POWs built a large bonfire in a central court, perhaps burning debris from abandoned huts. We did not intrude. It was their shelters going up in smoke. Orders from above were to “take cover when necessary”—not to interfere or retaliate unless there was a hazardous breakdown in order. Our command assumed that however fanatic the POWs were, wounded and ill prisoners, whatever their smuggled-in orders from the North, would soon recognize their desperate need for medical intervention, and cease resistance. That proved to underestimate their discipline.

Female demonstrations seemed just as die-hard. “Communist women,” I wrote,

break down barbed wire separating them from screened-South women. Screaming, singing, flag waving, rock throwing. They quiet down with few casualties. 150 sent to confinement in “monkey house” [cell block]. The SKs [safe] in Four now releasing pent-up tension. Radiantly joyous. Salute U.S. soldiers smartly. Features seem frozen in smiles.
When I entered they were enthusiastically making South Korean flags from scraps of sheets.

We learned from Koje that screening there was as complete as possible without risking further bloodshed. “Operation Spread-Out”—to remove screened-South POWs to five new mainland camps, and screened-North Chinese to isolated Cheju-do—was now suspended, with 85,000 unscreened POWs remaining in compounds where leaders brandishing crude weapons denied us entrance. More combat troops were en route. In our sector, tanks, half-tracks and jeeps with armed sentries patrolled in frustration past the unsubmissive wards.

It was grey and cold that Saturday, April 19. Three was suddenly quiet. A honcho pushed a note through the barbed wire for the compound head physician offering a tour of the wards to demonstrate their return to order but not to compliance. In equally dissident and unscreened One, a POW ward monitor told an MD captain he invited in, with his sergeant: “Now we can have our dressings changed, and more medication.” Entering with armed aides furnished unexpected cover for South-seeking prisoners, previously denied choice, to slip past and escape. New trouble then erupted. The die-hards brandished crude weapons. The medical team fled, and defiant flags went up again from huts and tents.

Passing by, an ROK colonel was enraged, ordering the Red displays put down in ten minutes or his troops would forcibly remove them. In eight minutes they were down. Yet he was soon reprimanded by timid American brass. Threats to use force had to be approved by Far East Command in distant Tokyo.

In Six, presumably screened North, a prisoner at the wire pleaded to a guard to be transferred, as he feared for his life. He was slipped out in darkness to a South compound, where he explained that he had been too frightened to expose his real sympathies. Interrogated by a Chinese screener, he refused to answer whether he was a Communist. To prod him, his questioner ripped open his shirt to display a Nationalist tattoo. “Well, I’m anti-Communist, too,” the escapee said. Baring his chest, the reticent arrival exposed an identical tattoo. Impulsively, they embraced.

Rain was falling steadily on Sunday, April 20. As a field telephone remained active in each compound (we wanted to overhear them), die-
hards in Three protested the denial of treatment to headquarters, as POW medics had pulled out. Re-starting noisy demonstrations, despite constant rain, and now mud, they demanded care. “POWs,” I wrote, “use [our] phone system to jabber to other POWs in distant compounds. This is condoned, as S-2 (Intelligence) has been monitoring the calls.”

Compound Two continued to refuse screening except on its own terms, which meant intimidating potential anti-Communists from voting with their feet. Defiantly, prisoners were now wearing crudely made red stars in their caps. Marching about in the enclosure with gaudy flags were prisoners we had thought were seriously bedridden, which meant either that they had been faking, or were forced somehow into cooperating painfully. The hospital commander responded by cutting off rations to Two, but timid higher authority in the person of General Paul Yount countermanded him.

My pair of Quonset huts nearby were becoming untenable—in the line of potential gunfire, and break-in—and I had personnel evacuated to safety. I noted in my scratch-pad diary that my chaotic operation had become “a government-in-exile.” We were still receiving and disposing of prisoners when possible. Also, that night, I was Officer of the Day. Some of the vigil in Headquarters included listening to POW chatter on phone linkages. By armed jeep I toured the enclosures and perimeter. It had become cold and clear. A narrow dirt road skirted the compounds and the rice paddies:

Tangled barbed wire filtered moonlight into strange shadows. ROK sentries stand quietly in the chill air. American and ROK tanks and jeeps patrol at a slow pace. Half-tracks with 50 cal. machine guns perch on rocky prominences, pointing their quad-fifties toward the compounds. POWs in Two have their own guards pacing up and down opposite ROK sentries. In Three, POWs are busy making knives and spears, and sharpening [metal] cot-ends....

Guerrilla activity was increasing as enemy efforts were made to contact holdout prisoners in order to plan moves, even breakouts, and further impact the truce talks. A half-track was fired at and a G.I. and ROK injured. The sniper got away.

Morning on the 21st began with a sunrise political challenge in casualty-populated One, opposite my emptied Quonsets. Wounds seemed of no consequence. “Large North Korean, Chinese Communist and Russian hammer-and-sickle flags displayed,” I wrote,
Russian and North Korean songs sung by the thousand-plus in the compound. Many battle casualties in their bandages, casts, and crutches. One with no legs stands on his stumps waving a flag. Ceremony ends abruptly just before 0800.... Just in time to miss the spectacle is General Yount, who arrives at Command Post for confab. Claims [truce] negotiations going smoothly—under no circumstances should we provoke a break in them by violence here.... Force should be used for prevention of escapes, but little else.

We knew nevertheless that nothing at the Panmunjom truce talks just about the 38th parallel was going smoothly. Nor was General Yount’s career.

The mobility of the POW amputees had long surprised me. Before the screening mutinies I had written on a scratch pad:

Amputees playing basketball, volley ball and soccer with amazing dexterity in spite of loss of limbs. Yet in a show of spite they would stop and freeze when they notice Americans watching—and grimly refuse to continue until G.I.s walk away.

Compounds One, Two and Three remained closed. All included hostages unable to screen South. Five, controlled by an anti-Red honcho, quietly screened “75% South.” I added: “One seriously ill patient expires as he is carried on a litter to be screened.” In Seven, rebellious women marched and sang, trying to incite unscreened men within hearing distance to keep resisting.

On the 22nd, sunny, clear and chill, a screening team arrived at the sally port to Three only to be told “by the commissars of the compound” that they were “not ready.” With them were an “elite squad” of fifty Koreans, crude red stars in their caps, who in unison gave Soviet clenched-fist salutes while their leader conducted them in taunts in English—“Death to Americans.... Down with American imperialists.” After a final upraising of arms, they about-faced and marched back into the interior of the compound. At Five, POWs dumped “a ton of refuse” to block their main gate, and sent squads atop each hut to plant flags and chant Red slogans with clenched-fist salutes. Finally reaching a level of exasperation not voiced earlier, General Yount asked the Eighth Army commander, General James Van Fleet, for authority to cut off food supplies to coerce the unscreened compounds into obedience. The request was forwarded to General Matthew Ridgway, who a year earlier had replaced MacArthur in Tokyo, and was about to be reassigned to NATO.
The next day, on the medical ruse of shifting them to equally Communist Five, twenty fanatic troublemakers in Six were spirited out and shipped to Koje-do. One was a dying, old, bearded “Commissar,” who plots havoc from his deathbed and is living proof of one’s will to live. POW chief doctor Shin blamed by angry Reds. He pleads with Americans for safety, threatens to commit suicide to save face.

From Tokyo, supposedly tough General Ridgway, who had visited us only once, backed down, vetoing the withholding of rations as likely to raise international displeasure. POWs didn’t like our food anyway, as their basic diet was polished rice shipped from Texas and Louisiana in great sacks. They wanted their Asian unpolished rice, but American orders were to withhold locally grown rice for Korean civilians. After meeting for 2½ hours, Yount and hospital and MP bigwigs determined to meet Ridgway halfway—delivery of food only to the gates of compounds blocking screening—and entry. As entry into the rebel compounds was clearly hazardous, that also meant denying internal medical care. Dispensaries would be set up in tents near each holdout sally port for emergencies—for those who come out or are carried out—“gate clinics,” according to Colonel Philip Noel, the hospital commander. We continued to receive new casualties from the line, screening them on arrival.

On the 24th, fewer than a dozen POWs were treated at the temporary aid stations. Hold-out honchos were reluctant to permit prisoners of dubious allegiance out for care, assuming that they would defect. None emerged from hard-line Three. In the closed compounds the extremists continued to drill and strut, and the following day, a Friday, was no different. The hold-out and screened-North wards, including the screeching women, remained in turmoil. And at night an ammunition dump over the hill was attacked, ROK guards shot and weapons stolen. I assumed neglect. The next night the site was raided again, and an American lieutenant colonel and his driver were killed. We could not accept their bodies as they weren’t prisoners of war. They were trucked elsewhere.

Orders came that no one was to leave the hospital enclosure at night, which came as a considerable sacrifice to the few used to slipping out against orders to seek sex, and likely VD, in the villages. When a G.I.—
even an officer—came down with tuberculosis, so rare in the States, it was almost always a sexually transmitted disease.

On Sunday night, the 27th, before dawn, five POWs escaped from Four. Only one was recaptured. It was probably coordinated with Red guerrillas, not one of my Operation Turncoat schemes, which were in abeyance during the screening troubles. The lusty singing in the compounds of the North Korean Red Army anthem, which now carried from ward to ward, was beginning to sound to me like “Anchors Aweigh.” I wrote: “Evidence of my becoming jaded?”

The next day, in a cold rain, six hundred able-bodied POW women screened North were trucked, under protest, in a queue of open trucks, toward a harbor for shipment to Koje-do. We were glad to see them go. The noise level diminished but not the defiance. “We will die before allowing screening,” was the response to screeners turned away again at Two. And in Four, a hanged prisoner was seen dangling. Obviously, a kangaroo court victim. Usually the dead were brought in darkness to a sally port but POW insolence was now flagrantly open.

In the early morning on the 29th the first units of the 15th Regiment of the 3rd Division appeared, ordered down from the 38th Parallel to augment security. They arrived singing Hank Snow’s “I’m movin’ on, I’ll soon be gone.” We hoped they’d stay long enough to intimidate the hold-outs, compelling their screening. Moving in with full equipment, the infantrymen took up quarters in the former women’s compound. Now we understood why the unladylike ladies had been speedily evicted.

Everyone was jumpy with expectancy. The next day was April 30, with May Day to follow—a date for some kind of Communist theater, worldwide. More troops from the 15th moved in, taking positions on the plateau above Three and quarters in other emptied compounds. Their patrols moved out into the surrounding hills. The perimeter guard, already quadrupled, was further bolstered. Machine gun emplacements were set up overlooking the hold-outs.

As midnight approached on the 30th, the first POW admissions from Koje-do in three weeks began arriving in huge open trailer-trucks—four hundred screened South casualties from the much smaller 64th Field Hospital. Singing South Korean patriotic songs in darkness lit only by vehicle headlights, and waving ROK flags, they could be heard
long before they reached us. Tension grew. As we did not know how the thousands of mutineers would react to the new arrivals, the occupants of the trucks were ordered into silence. As Officer of the Day again I rode around the perimeter with two armed MP captains while the newcomers were being processed, and found only quiet—the unappealing blackness of the nearby villages and utter silence from the compounds.

May Day began in brilliantly sunny fashion. Compound One initiated the day at dawn “with a colorful pageant,” I wrote,

featuring huge portraits of Mao, Kim Il Sung, and Stalin, plus other Communist saints, with all images created by prisoners within the camp. POWs march around with paper floral wreaths, flags, and banners emblazoned with Communist propaganda. Neighborly Two reciprocates with a regimental parade, singing of the NK Red Army song, dozens of North Korean, Chinese and Russian flags, close-order marching. Parade in Three is similar, but with more embellishments. POWs there climb on hut roofs, sing, wave banners. One (in English) says, “AMERICANS! GO BACK TO YOUR HAPPY HOMES.YOUR FAMILIES DO NOT WANT YOU TO DIE INVADING OTHER LANDS.” Lots of noise all afternoon, with demonstrations in other compounds which pale in comparison to Three and Two.

I was baffled by the preponderance of banners, flags and other ceremonial wherewithal. Where did it all come from? They had been making, hiding and hoarding stuff, apparently, for months, for little of it could have been supplied covertly by disloyal ROK sympathizers or by nearby villagers under darkness through the barbed wire. Yet the fanatical frenzy seemed useless. They were unable to break out, and the sick and wounded were not getting better by neglect. They must have also recognized the implications of an infantry regiment building up around them. Yet the rejection of reality seemed unalterable.

On May 2, although POWs in Three declined or were barred by henchos from their gate clinic, Two suddenly materialized a large sick call—only to halt it abruptly when one prisoner released for the dispensary ostensibly on medical grounds pleaded for safety. Further exits were barred from within. We had long realized that some POW spokesmen were not privates as they posed, but officers ordered to become prisoners, to lead the mutiny. Only one, a lieutenant colonel, had been identified to me by Intelligence. He played his role as if we never knew. We did know, but had we removed him, someone else inside would have replaced him. It was a mutual charade.
General Van Fleet arrived on an unannounced inspection early on May 3, a foggy, rainy morning. As he was in combat fatigues without insignia or visible rank, something was up. He left an hour later to fly to Tokyo. Suspicious, too, that trouble was brewing, several POWs in Two slipped overnight under the barbed wire into one of the vacated Admissions huts looking for records to examine and mutilate, and to steal whatever had been left behind. They made no effort to escape further, vanishing back into their compound. We found a crude tunnel.

The next day, a rainy, foggy Sunday, seemed no different from others since the screening mutinies began. More futile demonstrations and processions began, becoming more intense even as the rain increased. Our orders back into the looted Admissions huts the next day proved as misguided as expected. We were not permitted to retaliate against rocks and debris heaved at us over the barbed wire. My crews retreated, then were ordered back, this time wearing helmets. We could not appear to be intimidated, but obviously we were.

On the 6th Colonel Noel showed us a heartfelt message in English from screened-South prisoners in a labor force arrived from Koje, pleading to be separated from the “grim, bloody” hands of the extremists. I copied out the text on one of my note-pad slips:

We would like to work together in one compound. All are absolutely loyal and faithful…. It is always desirable in any society that everybody has his happy job according to his knowledge and ability. Here we firmly swear that we will do our best …. if this earnest hope could be realized.

It was signed by Kim Do Chang and three others “for the group.”

Noel explained that he intended such a separation and wanted to consult on final details for a new satellite hospital hurriedly being constructed seven miles away. The “Annex” would be limited to South POWs to forestall open warfare. All major medical procedures would continue to be done at the main facility, and personnel, under guard, would shuttle there and back. The satellite camp would open prior to the imminent and final forced screening to remove South-processed POWs from further hazard.

On May 7 the Annex relocation began, much too hastily, via ambulances and trucks, guarded by half-tracks. Die-hards in the hold-out compounds jeered and showered rocks on the convoys. “Camp is so newly erected,” I noted after surveying the site,
that much of it is only on paper—including tents, huts, roads and sanitation facilities. Truckers find that they have to build their own road to drive ambulances up. Amid much confusion a tent city begins to arise out of the rice paddies.

No one would be blamed. Incompetence and unreadiness were endemic.

A call from General Yount late on Thursday confirmed that upper-level failure to anticipate serious trouble was far worse elsewhere. On Koje, when sally port gates were opened for a work detail, Lieutenant Colonel Wilbur Raven, commander of the 94th Military Police Battalion, and several soldiers with him, all unarmed, as was the practice within the entry barbed wire, were taken hostage and their release painfully negotiated. POW leaders at Compound 76 charged that ROK guards had beaten several of their men while searching returning workmen for contraband, and under duress Raven promised to investigate.

The *honchos* insisted that Brigadier General Francis Dodd, the commander at Koje, accompany Raven. Dodd duly arrived, as he wanted no excuse to threaten the frustrating and interminable negotiations at the 38th parallel village of Panmunjom, which continued to go nowhere. A crowd of Koje POWs gathered at the gate ostensibly to listen, and seized both Raven and Dodd. Raven clung to a post until guards with bayonets forced his release. By then Dodd had been dragged within. Already prepared for the seizure was a defiant sign in English, raised at the sally port:

*WE CAPTURE DODD. AS LONG AS OUR DEMAND WILL BE SOLVED, HIS SAFETY WILL BE SECURED. IF THERE HAPPEN BRUTAL ACT SUCH AS SHOOTING, HIS LIFE IS IN DANGER.*

We knew little of the offshore situation so remote from us. “Gen. Dodd, CG of POW Camp on Koje,” I wrote,

*[is] a hostage of the Communists, a result of his dickering too close to the compound gates. Since the POW grapevine provides very rapid communication, Operation Clean-Out here may need to be delayed to safeguard [the] life of the general. The report appears fantastic and incredible—but true. Under no circumstances is a repeat to happen here, so order is given for no one to enter any compound. 9th Infantry Regiment (2nd Division) and 64th Tank Battalion [3rd Army] rushed to Koje to join 38th Regiment already there.... Forced screening postponed indefinitely, out of regard for Gen. Dodd’s health.*

At Koje, Van Fleet ordered Brigadier General Charles Colson rushed there to ban all press and photo coverage, and to use any force neces-
sary to free Dodd by the next morning at ten. In heavy rain, twenty tanks, five equipped with flame-throwers, were ringed around Compound 76. Work crews at Koje were rejiggering compounds vacant since screened-South POWs had been removed, dividing them into sixteen smaller compounds for housing die-hards to be evicted from Compound 76. In the interim, overnight, escalating prisoner demands were forwarded, in crude English, claiming inventively,

barbarous behavior, insults, torture, forcible protest in blood writing, threatening, confinement, mass murdering, gun and machine-gun shooting, using poison gas, germ weapons, experiment object of A-bomb, by your command. You should guarantee POWs human rights and individual life with the base on the International Law. Immediate ceasing the forcible investigation [screening] which thousands of POW of North Korean Peoples Army and Chinese Peoples Volunteers be ... in slavery, permanently and illegally. We will wait for your warm and sincere answer.

Colson rejected all charges. Most of the alleged offenses were fictional, and the deadline passed without action. Yet, mishandling the debacle, he agreed in writing to cease “forcible screening” (although there had been no force) and further exaggerated “that there have been instances of bloodshed where many POW[s] have been killed and wounded. I can assure in the future that POW[s] can expect humane treatment in this camp according to the principles of International Law.” Relishing their propaganda coup for the world press, the captors delayed a response, then offered to stage a showy release.

Overhead we saw a group of light planes ferrying Ridgway, Van Fleet and Mark Clark to Koje. Clark was replacing Ridgway, who was to replace Eisenhower at NATO in Europe as Ike had stepped down to run for the presidency. They were dismayed at Colson’s docile concessions but the ordeal was over quietly by 9:30 PM. Dodd was freed, his career at an end. As far as Clark was concerned, the bargain was brokered under duress, and invalid. From Tokyo he replaced the bungling Colson with Brigadier General Haydon Boatner, assistant commander of the 2nd Division, and a prewar China hand. Clark’s orders were precise: “You are to regain control of the rebellious prisoners on Koje and maintain control thereafter.” However distant, we realized the implications for us.

Our transfers of South POWs continued the next day, Friday, unrelated to the Dodd fiasco, which had made the international wire ser-
vices. (Few noticed us on mainland Korea.) In sunny weather again, as each tent went up in the Annex, an ambulance unloaded its occupants. The South transfers had already passed two thousand. In response, Six, already screened North, defiantly began refusing gate clinic care. Despite more than 2,000 far-advanced tuberculars, the compound commissar, a tubercular himself if his X-Ray on admission was genuine, threatened to create “incidents beyond vision of UN forces.” His cohorts, he claimed, preferred “to die slow death of illness.”

As darkness came, so did torrential rain, enabling four more escapes while passive ROK guards sought shelter. Rain and fog continued into Saturday May 10, as we began readying for forced screening. Patients and laborers would be rooted out and only bedridden cases returned to care. General Clark had accepted the necessity of coercion by withholding rations, and short-wave radio confirmed to us that Dodd had been released. We did not know yet what ransom, if any, was paid, and rumors flew. All we knew was that Dodd would be demoted to colonel, and that the Communist spin worldwide would leave us embarrassed and humiliated.

At 8:00 AM on Sunday, May 11, die-hard Three received a sound-truck ultimatum. All who were mobile were to assemble in a designated sector of the compound within one hour, or their food and water would be cut off. The hour passed with no response. Then Two was given the same orders, with the same threatened penalty. No movement to comply was evident. Compound One also received its ultimatum, with no result. Food and water were cut off. One and Two remained sullen and defiant. “Three does the unexpected,” I wrote, and begins to gather, with only scattered rumblings of discontent. [It seemed] puzzling. 15th Regiment’s 1st Battalion has encircled Three and stands ready to move in. Staffs in readiness to medically screen each POW after his decision about repatriation. We will discharge all the troublemakers but the very ill. The rest [who choose North, or silence] will go to Koje.

To effect the relocation, all prisoners were ordered to take their belongings with them for screening. Prisoners gathered quietly, then dispersed without a demonstration. No one emerged or was permitted by leaders to leave. All three compounds posted signs in English, Korean and Chinese: “WE REFUSE TO BE INTERROGATED. WE DESIRE TO SEND A SPOKESMAN TO THE TRUCE TALKS AT PANMUNJOM.” Chanting and shouting continued through the
day, into darkness. No rations were delivered, and the gate clinics remained dismantled. Still, the starve-out strategy seemed ineffective. Prisoners had long been hoarding food and water.

Sunrise on the 12th revealed widespread painting overnight on POW hut roofs, the white lettering (a mixture of lime and barley in water) contrasting sharply with the black, tarred rooftops: “STOP THE UNLAWFUL SCREENING ... WE WANT RICE AND WATER ... TAKE BLAME FOR DEATH OF POW.” Compound One raised blood-red flags, authentically so as pints of blood had been stored in its medical supply hut. In all North compounds, POWs paraded, sang and screamed. Three performed some intricate drill formations despite many in the line of march, I wrote, “walking with crutches, artificial limbs, or leg casts.” POWs in Two strode boldly with large banners. “GIVE PATIENTS FULL MEDICAL TREATMENT” was followed by another which decried the “CRUEL SAVAGE TREATMENT” as “MORE INHUMANE THAN HITLER.” Three posted a placard, “TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF DEATH OF PRISONERS FROM HUNGLY.” General Van Fleet dropped in by chattering helicopter to survey the scene.

By the next morning, more banners had emerged in the bright sun. Although closed, Two and Three were feeding in darkness from stored rations in their adjacent compounds, ROK guards spotting buckets of cooked rice being slipped through the covertly cut barbed wire. Three, nevertheless, posted a new banner, “IT WOULD BE BETTER THAT YOU SHOOT TO DEATH US THAN STARVE TO DEATH. WE WILL FIGHT YOU TO THE LAST DROP OF OUR BLOOD.” Isolated, Compound One had no adjacent source for food, but its water could not be turned off. In mid-afternoon loudspeaker trucks blared repeatedly into the holdout compounds: “Food is waiting for you—after you leave the compound and put your name on the roster. If you want to be repatriated and go back home, you must put your name on a roster which will be submitted to your leaders [at Panmunjom].” The warnings continued into the night but no one ventured out.

May 14 was oppressively hot. POWs began chanting, in Korean: “We want food. We want medical care. We want loudspeakers turned off.” To our surprise, three prisoners waving Red flags from a roof in One were picked off by bullets fired from a rice paddy outside. We never lo-
cated the source of the shots. Massing angrily at their gate and carrying the casualties, the POWs demanded doctors, and Captain Ed Billings, a Boston surgeon, arrived at the sally port.

“Carry them out!” he ordered:
“No, you come in and treat them inside.”
“Like hell I will,” said Billings.

The prisoners picked up their casualties and carried them to a nearby hut. Hours later they returned with three shrouded corpses purportedly killed in the incident. “The insane screaming,” I wrote,

grows louder, above the din of the relentless loudspeakers, which, together with the hot sun, seems to be loosening their minds. They commence funeral services for the three flag-draped bodies lying in state near the main gate....

They may not have been the newly wounded. The POW grapevine, however, was working. Other holdout compounds joined in sympathetic demonstrations.

In unfortunate timing, International Red Cross representatives arrived without warning during the chaos. Our loudspeakers were silenced:

They talk to POW leaders in tents [set up] outside the compounds, bar U.S. officers from attendance. POWs cheer IRC officials, wave flags, applaud loudly at deference shown their leaders at our expense. Communists refuse to let Red Cross see victims of shooting or to send them out for medical care. The officials leave obviously not in accord with starve-out measures or with forced screening. Night: quiet.

The following days, into May 17, were subdued, the holdouts seemingly listless. An escapee from One we discovered at dawn confessed that he didn’t want to return, and was so weak and hungry that when he stood up again he became temporarily blind. He was fed, and then screened South. By nine-thirty it became obvious that One, with access to water but lacking rations, was giving up. In the following four hours, 175 able-bodied POWs lined up at their gate and straggle out, their tails dragging, marching between bayonet-wielding troops of the 15th Infantry. After the cowed die-hards shuffle up the hill past Two and Three (both quiet and deserted), the blue-scarved soldiers of the 15th file into One with bayonets and billy-clubs. Order is restored.... Food and medicines are immediately dispensed from waiting vehicles. A POW complains because no soup is served.
The chief honchos, including “Blue Eyes,” the arrogant spokesman for One, very likely an officer purporting to be a private, were put to work with the others who were mobile to load accumulated rubbish, debris of flags and flag-making, and sheer garbage, into waiting trucks. The last fifty-six, apparently able-bodied, were marched up the hill to a vacant compound. Bedridden patients were not screened but were assumed to be North. Those who volunteered to stay South—one thirteen—were ferried by ambulance to the Annex.

On Sunday May 18 the Hospital command was “jumpy about conditions in Two and Three, worried that the combination of coercion and starvation will get this place described [by the IRC] as another Dachau or Buchenwald.” I was routed out to explain all the recent deaths to our command, reporting that we had done only what circumstances permitted, that no unusual escalation of deaths within, other than murders, had occurred—and that no reporters had been permitted in our area for a month. There were likely more bodies in Two and Three but we would only know about them when the wards were emptied.

Early the next morning in a gloomy drizzle at rations delivery time, loudspeaker trucks at Two and Three announced that if prisoners lined up at their gates for transfer they would be fed. No one came. Only a few POW sentinels were seen. We were ordered to pack .45s at all times. Something further would be happening soon.

Over the weekend a fleet of transports from Japan had unloaded the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team at K-9 airbase for transfer to Koje-do. It was obvious that a forcible clean-out was brewing there. On Monday, May 19, after dark, we were summoned to a meeting. A miserable rain kept falling:

We are to move into Three at dawn tomorrow. If they do not come out peacefully, the 15th Regiment will drive them out.... Drizzle lessens as fog settles over compounds and blankets them for the night.

Tuesday was a damp, grey day, with light rain falling. At 6:30 AM a sound truck paused at Three to warn all inside who were mobile to mass at their main gate. If no peaceful exit began, they would be forcibly escorted—not screened—to a new compound. Colonel Robert Hatfield of the 15th ordered his troops to surround Three. I was perched on the plateau above, helmeted and with a gas mask and a carbine. As holdouts recognized the inevitable, the lone, limp North
Korean flag high above the compound was hauled down by two agile prisoners who clambered to the roof of a hut. When no further movement occurred, an infantry platoon broke through the main gate and was attacked by hidden POWs

massed in compound mess hall nearby. Infantry retreats under flurry of rocks and spears [made from litter poles]. Tank bursts through fence near gate, smashes across barbed-wire entanglements and into POW mess hall, as tear gas canisters are thrown into it by the returning infantrymen. Communists from amputee ward on other side of compound (700 of them) rush out with crude spears, lances, flails, bombs, rocks. Concussion grenades are tossed in their path and explode with a roar. They are forced back.

Another infantry company moves in from the opposite end of the compound. Holdouts refuse to budge. Some come out fighting in spite of blinding tear gas. Infantrymen continue to pour in and press forward, and as POWs evacuate each gas-filled hut, Col. Hatfield calls for personnel on perimeter of compound to heave rocks at the Communists to drive them away from Six gate.... Hail of rocks pours down from plateau above compound.

Some mutineers escape into Six, but are halted by machine gun fire from tanks on plateau.... Bullets ricochet crazily into the air above the compound as red and yellow streaks.... Most POWs are now retreating to open area where shouted orders are for them to squat there....

We followed in as stubborn resisters were routed out of wrecked huts with concussion grenades and bayonets. The scene was eerie. Hundreds of amputees, many legless but for pylons, still resisted fanatically, with apparently nothing to lose but already abbreviated lives. Their metal stretcher poles, now fashioned into lances, were filed to razor sharpness, and the crude grenades they threw were made of casting plaster studded with nails and filled with gasoline. As the white smoke of tear gas clouded their eyes the POWs stumbled back, blindly heaving their weapons. A one-legged POW stopped by a grenade became a no-legged hulk. A bilateral amputee, crawling out of his gassed hut and aiming his lance at an oncoming G.I., was clobbered by a rifle butt, falling into a muddy drainage ditch. Grenades continued to blow out walls and roofs, and in my path a POW lay dead in a pool of blood, his right thigh laid open. I pocketed his hammered-out red star emblem.

Curiously, two recaptured prisoners wore self-tailored Nazi uniforms, complete to swastika armbands. Later, Colonel Noel was pictured by a G.I. reporter in The Stars and Stripes displaying the jackets. Another holdout lost, to me, his gaudy hat, with a crude swastika on
the front and an eagle atop. I trashed it, seeing no ideology in the Nazi symbols—only the intent to affront us.

Order of a sort was now being restored as cowed prisoners huddled near their broad *benjo*. A medical screening team moved in and the most serious casualties were evacuated—sixty to surgery, others, too late, to Digger Moore. The 1,192 fit for discharge, as liberally evaluated by physicians working furiously, were marched up the hill and, eventually, transferred to Koje-do: “Criteria for discharge: having one leg or both. No legs, they remain.” As they stubbornly sang the North Korean Red Army anthem while plodding forward, the march was halted and the application of rifle butts enforced silence. The G.I. reaction seemed less than humane, but the infantrymen were fed up. They had watched deadly hardball politics played out in what was ostensibly a hospital.

“A steady rain falls,” I wrote,

and the dampness keeps the pungent tear gas clinging to everything. Doctors examining patients while wearing gas masks.... Few POWs give their correct names to screeners.... Only 17 elect to say South.... Inspection proves that much food still around. The compound a shambles. Few huts have four walls and a roof. A big pyre lights the sky at twilight, as flags, signs, and wreckage go up in flames. They crackle in the dampness.

On the way back, I passed our mess hut and realized that I had nothing to eat all day. In a jolly mood the mess sergeant fried some Spam with scrambled (powdered) eggs and offered me a can of Carnation condensed milk. “I don’t have any more joe, sir,” he advised. “Just add some water to that and pretend it’s milk.” In twos and threes, more latecomers drifted in to be fed, and a cook began brewing coffee. Before long the aroma began mixing strangely with the tear gas arising from our clothes. We hadn’t liked what we had to do, but fanaticism and freedom had been in irreversible collision.

Back in darkness in Hut 8, MD Don Becker, reviewing the long day, summed it up while tugging off his malodorous fatigues: “We ought to call this place *The House of Usher*.”

As May 21 began, Compound Two remained the lone holdout. On one side was a neuropsychiatric ward. In the middle, up front and surrounded by a double fence of barbed wire, were my two abandoned Quonset huts. Separate on the far right was Headquarters Compound—the long huts once housing hundreds of able-bodied POW laborers. The rain and fog blanketing us had lifted by 6:00 AM as in-
fantrymen began massing on all sides, and loudspeakers began blaring an “or else” message to ambulant POWs: produce yourselves in ten minutes for screening and discharge or accept the consequences.

When time expired, troops with bayonet-tipped rifles and gas masks slung at the ready moved in to the left and right. Once grenades were heaved, tear gas began billowing out of the huts. No response came. Troops hacked at the barricaded doors with the butts of their rifles, ripping out the canvas and plywood walls with bayonet slashes. Not a prisoner was found in the entire compound, not even in the neuropsychiatric ward of more than 1,100. “Reason for lack of activity in recent days,” I wrote,

[is] now obvious: in recent nights, under a protective blanket of fog, they must have been slipped into [adjacent] Headquarters Compound through tunnels and under barbed wire. That [empty] compound must now be jammed … but the only ones in sight there are the POW sentries patrolling beside each hut and tent. How they could all possibly have been brought into Headquarters Compound unknowingly is a mystery—for although Two contained hundreds of able-bodied [laborer] fanatics, it also housed patients seriously ill with far-advanced tuberculosis, and NP cases who are wildly mad straight-jacket cases.

Colonel Hatfield ordered Headquarters Compound cleared—all POWs were to line up five abreast in front of the gate “–or we will go in and get them.” After some hesitation prisoners began lining up, “but obviously not all [are] in the column. They begin to chant Communist songs and raise fists in Red salute—a last, stubborn gesture of defiance. Ordered to quiet down, they refuse. Tear gas is tossed in, and in the hissing of the piercing white smoke they scatter … and all those still hiding in the huts scramble out, eyes streaming. Compound looks like an ant-hill which has been overturned.:

Arrogance gone, those who were mobile were led out and screened medically. Only 266 were kept as patients. Four more were added when they were unable to trudge up the hill. Many psychiatric cases proved to be fakes. The charade was over. Staying South were seventy-three who slipped aside, including a North Korean captain and a Chinese captain, both of whom had claimed on arrival to be privates. My head count showed forty-three missing—dead or escaped. One POW, I discovered,

has a fistful of identity cards, which are seized before he has a chance to dispose of them. Wondering whether they could be evidence of murdered hostages, I ask him where he got them. Unreconstructed, he tells me—with a bizarre sense of humor—that he was using them to learn how to read English.
In the aftermath, while fires still burned in Three, POW labor details began cleaning up in Two, and in the next two days, those in the final holdout compounds were screened and emptied without incident. As May turned into June, the 15th Regiment began withdrawing—“to go guerrilla hunting for a while.”

At four in the morning my hut phone rang. A guerrilla raid was in progress at an engineer battalion post near the hospital Annex. A follow-up twenty minutes later reported enemy seizure of two machine guns, ammunition and small arms—a fairly large-scale attack for our area. Two G.I.s and two ROKs wounded, and five G.I.s dead. The DOAs were brought to us in an Annex ambulance, escorted by an armed jeep. Several of the dead were barefoot, their feet scratched and bloody. While I wondered whether the G.I. bodies were robbed of the boots—valuable commodities in Korea—one of the men in the jeep understood my questioning glance: “We figure they must have been surprised out of their sleep and hadn’t a chance…” His voice trailed off.

In the wan light of early dawn, I watched the unloading of the DOAs and observed dangling from a limp body a dog tag with a familiar surname. Although as far as I knew the G.I. was not related to me, his surname was common in my family. Walking back with the MOD—the Medical Officer of the Day—we chatted about whether the attack was intended as guerrilla aid to the holdout prisoners. I suggested that, if so, it came at least twenty hours too late.

On May 24 the International Committee of the Red Cross, having visited us, sent a message to General Mark Clark condemning improper coercive measures in prisoner of war camps, including the withholding of food and water from three hospital compounds and the use of concussion grenades. Clark replied that forcible measures against die-hard, mutinous and murderous prisoners were employed with great reluctance. The concussion grenade, he claimed, was not a combat weapon.

Perhaps he would have noted the humane other side of the picture, had he known it. Service physicians not only employed singular and impartial skill on damaged bodies and, even, brains, but dealt with such afflictions as hemorrhagic fever—certain death before we came. And before the new miracle drug, streptomycin, was widely available
in the States, it was treating POW tuberculars. One note I scrawled reported that, although traumatic medicine in wartime is often so hurried and private as to be unknown—or almost unknown, after one casualty was carried from a rioting ward:

Navy surgeon Gene Laforet, in urgent need of fresh, whole blood to inject into a POW who shows drastic post-op weakening, taps his own veins to give a transfusion to the enemy patient.

Newspapers and wire services in the U.S., I discovered long after our small war in the wards, had reported, erroneously, only the final stages in a brief paragraph on May 26.\textsuperscript{5} The dispatch, apparently based upon a very mild handout for which I had no role, noted that patients who had resisted transfer to Koje had rioted, with one dead and eighty-five injured. I had seen much more than that myself. No reporters but for a cautious G.I. for The Stars and Stripes had been present afterward, and orders to us were that no photos were to be taken. Even Communist propaganda had other issues to promote, although prisoner of war matters were sufficiently significant on Moscow’s menu to sway naïvely neutral or undecided nations. President Truman had long charged that world Communism had no moral code, but Syngman Rhee’s autocratic rule and Washington’s seemingly helpless tolerance of him, perhaps with little alternative, undermined efforts to claim that the war in Korea was a struggle for freedom and democracy against slavery and authoritarianism. Rhee and his repression gave credence to even the most absurd claims from Stalin’s Russia and Mao’s China.

Pravda asserted that 1,400 POWs had been secretly shipped to the United States “for atomic weapons to be tried out on them.” Soviet propaganda also claimed that “in May this year new types of flame throwers were tried out on prisoners of war” and that “eight hundred prisoners had paid with their lives for their insistence on repatriation by being burned alive.” The foreign news page of Pravda featured a cartoon titled “American benevolence” portraying a bleeding, half-naked North Korean prisoner lashed to a post. In front of him stood a two-star American general armed with a gore-splashed revolver, a monstrous hypodermic, handcuffs and a stout whip. Holding up the prisoner’s bloody hand the caricature general announces: “Look, he doesn’t want to be repatriated.” Another Soviet cartoon depicted a gangster-like, helmeted G.I. with submachine gun leading a group of
burly soldiers over the bodies of prisoners to restrain other POWs with rifle butts. In the caption the gangster scowls at the peace-loving prisoners: “Now, let’s hear who wants to be repatriated.” The Stalinist version left no room for subtlety.

Accusations of germ warfare were soon making headlines, with concocted camera “evidence” of North Korean civilians collecting buckets of supposedly germ-laden flies dropped in American bombs. As Korean agriculture above and below the parallel depended upon widespread use of human feces as fertilizer, there were clouds of flies to validate the fiction, and fellow-traveler scientists to offer spurious authority. Even several American pilots who cracked under brainwashing were filmed, one confessing, in propagandistic language: “I was forced to be a tool of these warmongers, made to drop germ bombs.”

Further, there was Koje-do, where Compound 76, which had seized General (now Colonel) Dodd, was pacified on June 10, 1952 after fierce resistance with the usual improvised weapons. Tanks and flamethrowers—which we also had ready but did not need—ended the battle, with forty-one reportedly dead and hundreds injured. One American paratrooper died, and fourteen were wounded. Neighboring and holdout Compound 77 then submitted without a fight.

In the end, still a long way off, Operation Big Switch would return to the Communists 70,159 North Koreans and 5,640 Chinese choosing repatriation. In a propaganda defeat for the enemy, about fifty thousand, mostly Chinese, remained “South.” The Communist side sent back 3,597 Americans, 1,312 other UN troops, including Brits, and 65,000 South Koreans. About 12,000 others, more than half of them American prisoners, had died of wounds and atrocities and the intense cold after capture. Twenty-one successfully-indoctrinated Americans and two Brits refused repatriation. Some over the years would trickle back to prison or to dishonorable discharges, or to both.

After the mutinies, even the usual chaos seemed calm. Murders and kangaroo court executions still occurred. My notes recorded them almost daily. When possible, autopsies were performed on corpses found where death seemed to have occurred from something other than natural causes. Often “perfect crimes” seemed to have been committed and no weapons like “blunt instruments”—even rocks—were found. But there were always sandbags. Sometimes the reported dead seemed to
disappear. We would conclude that a missing prisoner was an escapee, only to find his body buried, along with other long-vanished patients and laborers, under a hut or a tent floor, concealed by straw mats. What could not be hidden long, except in winter, was the sickly sweet, nauseating odor of the putrefying dead.

Ben (“Spider”) Selling, our chief pathologist, relished puzzling cases and was frustrated by being remote from a big city police morgue. Yet one episode, he had to admit, was beyond anything in his experience—that of a prisoner discovered, with difficulty, deep in liquid feces. Captain Selling first suspected foul play but the evidence indicated that the cause was location—what we referred to as our “eighth wonder of the world.” In the hospital’s largest ward was the biggest benjo, I was told, in history. It was a vast, open latrine of four hundred seats—or, rather, rectangular squatting holes—over “honey” pits fifteen to thirty feet deep. Given the endemic dysentery, what went in was always liquefied, and the surrounding vapor exceeded anything horror tales might invent. Emaciated from illness, the prisoner had been overcome by the fumes and was so thin that he had fallen in. Ben found fecal material in his lungs and stomach. He had drowned.

Earlier, a dead POW was removed by his executioners, with the assistance of helpful laborers, in a large “honey bucket.” Few would have thought of examining its fecal contents, but the carriers’ struggle seemed suspicious. My note about it, after the discovery, read: “What a hearse!” Another note on my scratch-pad pages reads: “TB POW chewing on corpse in tent. Claims flesh of dead TB victim will cure his ailment.” Perhaps it was a folk-medicine equivalent to vaccine. Digger Moore removed the evidence.

Toward the close of my holiday from civilization came a rare example of what we missed. All we had experienced to date had been Eddie Fisher’s troupe, one of his seventy gigs in Korea. On December 23, 1952, hefty
Wagnerian dramatic soprano Helen Traubel arrived, backed by a tinny piano on an open truck. Most G.I.s were puzzled by her appearance: they had wanted Bob Hope for Christmas, as his crew not only included attractive choristers, but was filmed for television, and the home folks might have glimpsed some familiar faces in the audience. What they would not have glimpsed, cautiously off to the edge of our crowd, were two full colonels with their Korean squeezes—officially taboo to lesser ranks, but hardly uncommon to higher brass in Korea and Japan. Nor had it been rare in the big war, from Eisenhower on down.

“I feel kinda strange,” Helen Traubel shouted to her outdoor audience, “with such a small piano—and sometimes there’s a note that doesn’t strike.” Her keyboard partner, I noted, “was engaged in a furious combat with the piano. Accompanist lost.”

In a long gown over which she had draped a coat against the December chill, she sang art songs by Beethoven and Schubert; Brahms’s Lullaby; spirituals like Steal Away and Swing Low, Sweet Chariot; and, anticipating Christmas, Where Were You When They Crucified My Lord? Then she asked: “Could you stand just one short Wagnerian aria?” The stand-up crowd largely had no idea what a Wagnerian aria was, but politely cheered, and she sang Sieglinde’s “Thou art the Spring,” from Die Walküre. An encore followed, but there were no hurrahs following the most memorable offering in her repertory, the Carolina folk song He’s Gone Away:

I’m goin’ away for to stay a little while,
But I’m comin’ back if I go ten thousand miles.
Oh, who will tie your shoes?
And who will glove your hands?
And who will kiss your ruby lips when I am gone?

Utter silence followed. The lyrics were too close to the bone. Then wild applause erupted. Traubel and accompanist waved, climbed back into the truck, and were gone.

Soon gone for me was the war. It had become a bloody stalemate, every hill bitterly fought over basically to establish a strategically favorable—and future—truce line for each side. Dean Rusk, later a Secretary of State, recalled that the Air Force bombed “every brick that was standing on top of another”—but there were few targets of opportunity south of the Yalu River, and orders were to not bomb Mao’s China in
order to avoid a larger war. His hundreds of thousands of troops in Korea, thousands still becoming our prisoners, by Mao’s fiction were only “volunteers.”

A few days before I left Korea for the States, for separation from active duty, Colonel Best, a stocky, avuncular guy with a grey brush cut, and my third hospital commander, summoned me. I thought he was going to offer a perfunctory goodbye and well-done. It was February 1953, and a wet snow was falling. I had been in the war zone for seventeen months. “I have a TWX” (teletypewriter exchange), he said, waving a teletype message at me, “ordering me to put you in for a medal, but I’m not supposed to know what it’s for. You’re a professor. Write me something I can put in a citation.”

He handed me a pencil and pad. Only in the most minute sense was I a professor. Until my reserve commission was activated, I had been teaching college freshmen for two years. I assumed that the TWX referred to “Turncoat.” Covertly, in Korea, I had been involved in an operation that was not as hazardous as it was thoroughly illegal and utterly stupid. My small, compartmentalized role had effectively ended with my departure orders. Although the operation, I thought, had been failing from its own illogic, Korea had not been a failed war except in terms of MacArthur’s early fantasies. Above the 38th parallel it was leaving in place a rigidly Red throwback but the door seemed to be closing on further Cold War encroachments elsewhere.

While Colonel Best waited silently I sat down, put the pad on my knee, and began, in crisp bureaucratic prose: “Lieutenant Stanley Weintraub is being recommended for meritorious achievement in ground operations against the enemy.” After a
few more brief and necessarily vague sentences, I handed back the pad and pencil:

“Will that do, sir?” I asked.

“Just what I needed,” he said.

Months later, back home, I received, only days apart, two letters from my former employer. One granted me, much too belatedly, formal Top Secret clearance to perform missions now in the past tense. The other announced that I had been awarded a Bronze Star Medal. Did I want it conferred in a formal ceremony at Fort Meade, Maryland, or have it mailed? A return envelope was included. “Just mail it,” I wrote.6

In the late 1980s a belated competition was announced for the design of a Korean War memorial to be sited, as was grimly appropriate for the “forgotten war,” near the much-praised Vietnam memorial on the Capitol Mall. “Nam” had blotted out Korea in the public mind. I was then nearing the close of twenty years directing a research institute at Penn State. My efficient associate then, Eliza Pennypacker, was a landscape architect. She and three colleagues had determined to pool ideas and enter a design, but all four were too young to have any experience of the Korean War or even to know its history. The only one they knew who did was me.

“However striking they are, we don’t want to borrow Maya Lin’s aesthetic ideas embodied in the Vietnam memorial,” Eliza said. “Do you have any suggestions to start us off?”

I recalled for them that in seasons without rain, troops often used dry stream beds to traverse roadless terrain. “Why not show a platoon of weary soldiers trudging along a path like that, partially concealed by trees along the banks?” The two landscapists of the four jumped at symbolizing the cost of war by proposing that the trees be clipped “tortuously,” as if by shellfire. They proposed uniformed figures positioned in lifelike movement and carrying equipment relevant to the early 1950s in an austere setting.

In 1989 the local design team won the competition—although its achievement was soon tangled in bureaucratic infighting that is political Washington. The memorial’s advisory board and various reviewing agencies, especially the Commission on Fine Arts, wanted a more uplifting look. Also, thirty-eight figures (to represent the fought-over
38th parallel) in slightly larger-than-life stainless steel would not only be too expensive but could overwhelm the space needed for circulating groups of onlookers. The various advisers, few of whom had any experience, nearly forty years on, of wartime Korea, recommended reducing the number of figures by half, outfitting each figure with spiffy uniforms, walkie-talkie radios (although a squad might then have had just one), and loading each with a backpack and rolled-up poncho. (Unlike Nam, prepared for the inevitable with a plethora of body bags, we often employed ponchos to wrap the dead.) Also, there had to be flags somewhere, a memorable motto for the war ("Freedom is not Free"; my motto would have been "War is Not Uplifting"), and bronze plaques identifying all the participating UN countries, however token their contributions. The revisions went on and on, reminiscent of the bureaucratic imposition that Maya Lin’s abstract, minimalist Viet Nam memorial on the Mall include a group of superfluous soldiers.

Finally, Eliza and her team resigned in protest, sued in Federal Court to protect their design—and lost. Credit for the memorial, still basically their concept, was assigned to Frank Gaylord for the figures, Gaylord and Louis Nelson Associates for the memorial wall, and Cooper-Lecky Architects. One of the architects—obviously not Eliza—would claim foolishly that the soldiers and setting were inspired by an unidentified photograph of Marines in 1950 by LIFE photographer David Douglas Duncan. (The only masterpiece created by a committee remains the King James Version of the Scriptures, unique as an authentic biblical miracle.)

The opening of the site was delayed by political bickering until July 1995. Despite the added kitsch, the Korean War Memorial, especially the slogging, if spiffily outfitted, soldiers in the imaginary ravine, is almost a moving experience. Few visitors will learn anything there about the unpretty reality of war. I still consider that the concept in its original honesty belongs to Paul Lucas, Veronica Burns Lucas, Don Alvaro Leon, Eliza Pennypacker Oberholzer—and me.
Endnotes


2. In a turnabout, Cheju is now a popular, semi-tropical island for holiday seekers.

3. A ditch for sewage.

4. neuropsychiatric

5. Eugene Laforet (1924–2002) was a member of the United States Naval Reserve from September 1942 until June 1976. He served in the Korean War and was a captain in the United States Navy Medical Corps. He was the Chief of Thoracic Surgery at Newton-Wellesley Hospital. Laforet received the Pope John XXI International Prize for Medical Ethics in 1962.

6. The full citation, dated 15 April 1953, from Headquarters: Korean Communications Zone: APO 234 for the Bronze Star Medal reads as follows: “First Lieutenant STANLEY WEINTRAUB, 01917855, Medical Services Corps, United States Army Lieutenant WEINTRAUB, a member of the 14th Field Hospital, is cited for meritorious service in connection with military operations against an armed enemy in Korea during the period 13 September 1951 to 19 February 1953. Serving as Hospital Registrar and Admission and Disposition Officer responsible for supervising maintenance of patient records and medical statistics, and for administrative aspects of patient admission, transfer and discharge, Lieutenant WEINTRAUB consistently carried out the intricate duties attendant to his position in a highly exemplary manner. His exceptional efficiency, broad professional knowledge and constant devotion to duty earned him the respect and admiration of all those with whom he served and contributed immeasurably to the success achieved by his organization in accomplishing its important mission. The meritorious service rendered by Lieutenant WEINTRAUB throughout this period materially furthered the cause of the United Nations in Korea and reflects great credit on himself and the military service.”

On the same General Order of 15 April 1953, Captain Frank R. P. Benson, infantry, United States Army, mentioned in the ‘Korea’ chapter as the ‘commanding officer to a front-line ambulance company’ and one of Stan’s close friends for the remainder of both of their lives, was also awarded the Bronze Star (First Bronze Oak-Leaf Cluster).