Chapter 4
Korea
1951–1953

When the <i>Woodford</i>, a World War II freighter converted to troop transport, pulled away from a dock in San Francisco Bay early in August 1951, the Army band onshore broke into Woody Guthrie’s “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know You.” It seemed an unfortunate choice for our send-off. Then came the no less appropriate “Gonna Take a Sentimental Journey.” In the morning fog, as the <i>Woodford</i> churned away, we could barely see the vanishing span of the Golden Gate.

After a rough, rainy voyage across the Pacific to Japan, the 1,600 soldiers and ninety officers crowded into bunks seven tiers high disembarked in Yokohama and were dished out SOS on the dock. Two days of bureaucratic delay at nearby Camp Drake were my first exposure to Japan. The bursting expanse coped ineffectively with troop arrivals. In further bureaucratic stupidity, its two sprawling segments were separated by a village in which all the inhabitants seemed to be enterprising streetwalkers of every age. Music blared from cheap souvenir shops, most memorably “<i>Shina no yoru</i>,” the theme from the 1940 propaganda film <i>China Nights</i>, starring the beautiful, then-teenage, Yoshiko (Shirley) Yamaguchi. A generation later, at a posh restaurant in Johannesburg, South Africa, a pianist boasted to clientele that he could play any song requested. I walked over and asked for “China Nights.” He promptly hit the right keys.

Occupied Japan would be the closest thing to Utopia for those G.I.s mired in Korea and eligible for a few days’ leave. Later, my first opportunity would come when I had to find a volunteer to take a dog’s head,
packed in a bucket of dry ice, to Tokyo Army Hospital to be checked for rabies. It had bitten a soldier and was killed. I volunteered myself and handed the bucket to someone waiting for it at Haneda Airbase, and was then driven into a vast city with little but Army traffic and few traffic lights.

On leaving Camp Drake we entrained south overnight to embark on another, far more ungainly ship. It augured the unpromising future suggested in the Army Band’s California farewell. Box lunches were distributed belatedly on the train as daylight was vanishing. Included was a hard-boiled egg—the only non-powdered egg I would see for seventeen months. We clattered down half the length of Honshu and through an undersea tunnel into Kyushu, on rigid commuter seats. At Sasebo, a naval base in the south taken over from the Japanese, the troop trains disgorged us in darkness for an overnight voyage across the strait to Pusan and transfer to replacement depots in the no longer placid “Land of the Morning Calm.” On the dock we queued up for SOS, coffee, and an orange. (I would encounter an orange again only once during my service in Korea. It was frozen.)

Officers first, we boarded what did not look like a troopship. Blotted with rust and sagging in the oil-slicked swells, the old ferryboat Koan Maru did not appear oceangoing, but it was our ticket to the war. The sea was rough, and the broad deck was soon awash. On a level below, the lavatory facilities—benjo in Japanese—consisted of a wide, odoriferous space with dozens of round openings over which to squat gingerly as the rustbucket swayed. By the first glimmering of dawn we were eager for solid ground—until we approached within a few miles of shore. Then the fecal stench of Korea, where human excrement fertilized the soil, almost as fetid as the fumes rising from the ferry’s benjo, billowed out to greet us and left us speechless. We hoped it would be a short war.

It wasn’t. A year of conflict had already cost a million casualties, soldier and civilian, on both sides. After costly see-sawing and General MacArthur’s failed mission creep toward the border with China, the ragged front was roughly where the war began, astride the 38th parallel—originally a Cold War military frontier. Above it the Russians had effected the Japanese surrender in 1945, below the line the Americans.

A thumb-like Asian appendage the size of California, Korea had seemed an insignificant backwater—until the North Korean Commu-
nist invasion late in June 1950. We were there to drive them back from the south, and also to confront the massive Red Chinese armies that had intervened. Also involved were Stalin’s unacknowledged accomplices who supplied armaments across the Siberian border and flew the insignia-deceptive MIGs that ostensibly were not Soviet yet were piloted by Russians in North Korean uniforms.

From the dock we ninety officers were trucked to the ramshackle Pusan Railway Transport Office, climbing there into dingy railway carriages with their filthy windows open to let out the summer heat and suck in the smoke and soot from the ancient Japanese steam locomotive. The train chugged slowly to the replacement barracks for arriving officers at K-2 airbase at Taegu, in south-central Korea. On the edge of a runway we queued up for plastic trays and the inevitable SOS. The nearby roar of F-94 jet fighters, outfitted with bomb racks and powered for heavy lifting with disposable JATO (jet-assisted take-off) rockets, seemed constant throughout daylight. At nightfall, after watching Betty Hutton in Annie Get Your Gun on a flickering screen in a Quonset hut, which seemed less funny from our expectations about enemy marksmanship, we bedded down on barracks cots until duty assignments came the next morning.

After lights-out there was little talk. Being afraid of being afraid was an unacknowledged reality. I worried about becoming a casualty wherever I would be. No place in a war zone was without risk. Death—“lights out” of another kind—was less feared than mutilation. We had seen the broken bodies of the wounded, on litters and in wheelchairs, on the dock in Yokohama waiting to be loaded on the Woodford for its return voyage to the States.

Until then my experience in uniform had been in Texas, that of pseudo-war, most memorably crawling through the infiltration courses with real bullets flying overhead, shooting pop-up dummies in the replica of a small village, and a night map-reading exercise. All were pre-requisites to overseas assignment. In the barren hills above Camp Bullis, a platoon placed under my innocent guidance had been set loose in the chill darkness, like a number of others, with only blue-tinted flashlights, to find, somewhere unknown but a target point marked on a map, a six-by-six truck with hot coffee waiting. A poor navigator even by auto, I expected to be even more helpless on foot, but after some stumbling
through the rocks and underbrush under a planetarium sky, I sensed the aroma of strong, steaming coffee. My group was the first to arrive.

At Fort Hood we had proceeded through three infiltration-course exercises—in daylight, in wetted down dirt, and in darkness. The fifty yards, half the length of a football field, were sprayed about thirty-six inches above our heads by fixed machine guns. At night, tracer bullets whizzed over. In combat gear we crawled through each course, gingerly lifting barbed wire to avoid entrapment. Rising in panic was not recommended. Unfriendly fire seemed no illusion. After slogging through the muddied course at dusk I turned into the nearest barracks to search for water. Enlisted men who had gone through before our officers group were milling about unclad, emerging from the mass showers. In release from tension some G.I.s were singing “Good Night, Irene.” One G.I., seeing, I thought, my lieutenant’s bars, rushed to salute, his towel falling away. “Stan,” he said in surprise, “What are you doing here?” It was my one-time schoolmate Eddie Fisher, literally a buck private, but soon a V.I.P. crooner again, despite his rank, entertaining troops in Korea with his signature “Lady of Spain” and “Oh! My Papa!” I would encounter him there again.

After breakfast outdoors on plank tables just off the Taegu airstrip—it was, as expected, SOS—we queued up to receive our assignments. Bob Benson, whom I had met in Texas and again on the Woodford, was posted as commanding officer to a front-line ambulance company, discovering when he arrived for duty that he was the outfit’s only white soldier. (The Army had officially been desegregated by President Truman in 1948 but foot-dragging inequalities persisted.) I was designated replacement Registrar and Admissions Officer to the Prisoner of War Hospital, a title which proved to conceal a range of unwritten responsibilities. Whatever else I would be ordered to do became my MOS—military occupational specialty—of record.

I knew little about civilian hospitals and nothing about such unconventional sites as the one I encountered. I had not been in a hospital of any sort since, at eleven, I had my tonsils out, and I had never seen a prisoner of war except on bubble-gum cards. On paper the sprawling facility erected around a drab, white-stucco, Japanese-built former school building—the only permanent structure—combined two field hospitals, each by ignored regulation limited to four hundred “beds.” It
housed many multiples of that in a thousand tents, many, suggesting a forever war, being replaced by 235 long, canvas-and-plywood huts. Resemblance to a stateside equivalent was remote, but this was a combat zone. The barbed wire enclosed expanse of tents and huts surrounded by dusty villages and fecally aromatic rice paddies had swollen into the largest and most unruly hospital, then, in the world.

Clustered next to the fenced wards (several in each guarded enclosure) were “workers’ compounds” housing thousands of able-bodied POW laborers, ranging from captured Army doctors and nurses to the willing and unwilling hands who performed, under guns, the plethora of grimy housekeeping tasks. These were also holding areas—for POWs discharged as reasonably healed or cured—until they could be moved to the offshore prison island of Koje-do. Many, however mobile, were fanatically indoctrinated security risks. Some of the badly wounded arrived concealing live grenades. Prisoners were being captured even as they attempted to withhold identities, ripping off uniforms, hiding their weapons under peasant clothing, and posing as refugees. Troops were ordered to shoot anyone in civilian garb seen moving at night. Bleeding-heart lamentations from abroad had little connection to cold reality. Anyone unidentified could be armed and dangerous.

As 1951 began, six months into the war, seven thousand prisoners had already been crowded into the mushrooming enclosures. On March 31, when the unreliable hospital census had reached 10,834, the chaotic daily turnover was 1,715 patients. By the time I arrived late in the summer, the huge hospital had coped with nearly seventy thousand POWs and, counting dead-on-arrival cases, had handled nearly five thousand fatalities. On occasion the bodies piled up so rapidly that they were stacked like cordwood next to the admissions huts.

War-ravaged Korea was a classroom without walls. I became a quick learner because I had to be. On my first day I faced real responsibility and unending uncertainty with what I could adapt from irrelevant education and less experience. Had I earned an elite B.A. somewhere else, rather than the apparently limited B.S., the only degree for which I was eligible, would I have been a buck private commanded by someone like me?

I replaced a gaunt, exhausted major who seemed more elderly in appearance than his actual years. He was relieved to be reassigned home,
and I saw him for only one day of haphazard orientation. “Nothing to worry about,” he said jovially, happy to be leaving. “Sergeant Moreland will show you the ropes.” Thomas Moreland, in his early forties, was a Black veteran who had been downsized from captain to corporal at postwar demobilization late in 1945. He wanted to stay in and accepted what was offered, rising to three buck-sergeant stripes in Korea. He became invaluable to me, until his eyes began to yellow from cheaply acquired heroin in the villages, and I ordered him home with a promotion to first sergeant without identifying his addiction and aborting his career. Distance from the bad stuff, I hoped, would be a withdrawal cure.

“Don’t depend too much on Leo,” Moreland advised. Captain Talbot ran the incoming and outgoing registry from a pair of Quonset huts nearby. As a second lieutenant with zero experience, I was, with good reason, despite inferior rank, Talbot’s boss. A captain in the Army Reserve after 1945, he had seized the opportunity, with the new war, to return to active duty. “It’s better than being a supermarket butcher,” he told me, his ruddy face twisted into a grin, “and Scotch is real cheap for officers, if you know how to get it.” Obviously he knew how. The Eighth Army’s commander until his death in December had been Walton (“Johnnie”) Walker. Leo was intimately familiar with another Johnnie Walker.

The hospital registry was a shambles. In barbed wire compounds were tents and huts farther than I could see, housing ten thousand-plus patients and thousands of unreliable POW trusties on work duty, guarded ineffectively by unreliable Republic of Korea (ROK) guards at sally-ports and on rough wooden sentry towers. Most prisoners, some burned, blasted or bombed into unrecognizability, arrived from the lines with no identity but a casualty tag. I felt like a person tasked to put together an enormous jigsaw puzzle. Although more pieces were left over than could possibly fit into the scheme, few of them fit the gaps.

Many POWs on interrogation would not identify themselves. Some offered names that my interpreters said were the titles of Korean or Chinese popular songs. A few patients were spies or intelligence officers who claimed low ranks and faked symptoms, exploiting the huge, unruly hospital as a message center. As a last recourse all—even the dead—were thumb-printed in lieu of other identification. DOAs
continued daily to be piled several bodies high next to a Quonset hut awaiting removal. Their odor lingered 24/7.

Not only were there in-hospital dead and DOA corpses for burial but a continuing collection of mangled or amputated limbs to dispose of. One of my minor tasks required utilizing an officer under me who was perhaps the most incompetent second lieutenant in the Army, kept on by special dispensation and overage without promotion, because he was the occasional gay partner of South Korean President Syngman Rhee’s son. His job became the preparation and signing of multiple copies of POW death certificates to be sent to an international body in Geneva. (Under sensitive intelligence circumstances kept from his purview, I would soon create and sign some myself.) Also there was “Digger” Moore, a lanky sergeant once an undertaker in Kansas City. His assignment was to take squads of prisoners under ROK guards to unmarked sectors in the bleak hills to bury the reeking, tarpaulin-shrouded body parts. We could not incinerate them, as the upshot might be rumors of another Auschwitz or Dachau. Someday the unidentified contents of Digger’s deep pits of decayed remains will be unearthed by puzzled archaeologists who may speculate about strange cannibalistic or sadistic Korean cults.

Although the most gruesome stuff was somehow kept from prying war correspondents, as few were ever permitted to visit, Digger’s crews could only operate in daylight. Guerrilla activity was always anticipated and unpredictable—not merely from NKPA (North Korean People’s Army) infiltrators eager to contact, or pry loose, prisoners, but from local villagers. Their hatred of the dictatorial, long expatriated Syngman Rhee, foisted upon them by their American occupiers—and now rescuers—was widespread. ROK Army guards—illiterate and poorly paid conscripts, easily bribed—were often ineffectual or disloyal, or both. Security, from outside and within the barbed wire, was always at risk. It was unsafe to enter a POW compound after dark. At dawn, bodies of murdered prisoners, victims of Red versus anti-Red internal warfare, were found at the gated sally ports—the barbed wire vestibules at ward entrances, sandbagged, strangled or stabbed.

Echoing booms at night sometimes came from ammunition dumps or weapons sites blown up by guerrillas. “Five minutes to four,” I noted about one pre-dawn episode,
loud explosions shook our flimsy hut, and knocked down the pipe of our pot-belly stove. To the rear of one hill behind us, the sky was bright with a red-orange pulsating glow, punctuated by trails of exploding rockets and artillery shells. The blasts shook the earth under our feet.

The booming continued into daylight, when a half-track came by and an officer leaned out and reported that there was so much explosive material in the dump that we were unlikely to get much sleep for three or four days.

Nevertheless, high brass on pseudo-inspections often came overnight on the last day of a month, as colonels or generals in posh occupation slots in Japan could earn an income tax exemption for every month in a combat zone; and their departure the next day earned a further month’s credit. One colonel who hung his helmet on a tent pole had the good fortune to have the hard hat fall and crease his forehead when the ground shook after a guerrilla raid nearby. He recommended himself for a Purple Heart medal and flew back to Tokyo.

G.I.s brought in bloody and mangled could not be kept after emergency treatment because the hospital installation was restricted to POWs. Digger Moore and his assistants were under orders to truck the American dead somewhere else for identification and burial. There were also “line crossers” for whom there was no military classification. Soon after my arrival, I approved admitting a father, mother and four small children. They were undoubtedly North Korean noncombatants. South Korean facilities had rejected them. Their home had been shattered by an artillery shell and the eldest daughter and her parents badly wounded. The next day I received a call from the commanding general’s aide that headquarters had learned we were harboring illegals. We were to get rid of them.

Using the Army’s own devices to stall, I agreed to investigate, and while the three uninjured children played with a mounting pile of empty beer cans as building blocks, we circumvented the order until father, mother and ten-year-old had all undergone surgery and post-op care. For the girl it meant prosthetic assistance for a gangrenous, amputated foot. Then I reported that the general was indeed correct, and the family had been discharged—on paper. Two months later they were actually released, all dressed in cut-down khakis and G.I. blankets. They had survived, but there was little hope for their future in the chaos that was Korea.
My assignment seemed overwhelming, especially for an innocent. Determined at twenty-two to look more like an officer in charge of something important, I attempted a mustache. The result was less than formidable. No one noticed. I shaved it off. No one noticed.

In Hut 8, I was the only non-MD. It was a historic number but no one then knew it. Hut 8 in Bletchley Park, Buckinghamshire, in the early 1940s housed scientists like Alan Turing who broke the Nazi Enigma Code. We had some brilliant surgeons and internists, as dedicated as any anywhere, yet performing, often with extreme measures not yet in the approved manuals, upon enemies who would have murdered them if they could.

A contingent of Army nurses occupied another long hut. Some were career officers whose service began during the earlier war. All were restricted to operating room and post-op duty and not permitted in the unsafe POW compounds. A few, even in their shapeless fatigues, began, as the months passed, to seem appealing. Less so was a lean, fortyish major with a leathery complexion who was the only female Medical Corps surgeon in Korea, posted to us because as a child of missionaries in China she had grown up fluent in Chinese.

The several dozen other MDs were not all Army. Some were Navy physicians on detached service, one of whom became a postwar pioneer in kidney transplants. Another, a saturnine Army surgeon from Boston overwhelmed by cases only he could cope with, kept his hands steady by shots of brandy washed down with cans of beer. A young physician from San Francisco had earned his MD before he was twenty-one and could only practice as a civilian then if someone his elder signed the papers. An anesthesiologist from Denver procured illegal but highly effective jungle opiates like curare by mail from a cooperative former colleague in Brazil. A tireless pathologist from Oregon performed a dozen or more autopsies a day on corpses appearing to be at least thirty-five—to him the beginning of old age in the East. (Ben was looking for signs of incipient arteriosclerosis in bodies subsisting largely on

Fig. 10 In Korea, in uniform, with a short-lived mustache
meatless diets.) A dentist from Buffalo turned informal plastic surgeon tried to repair jaws shot away, and another tried to fix the facial ravages of napalm burns. (One otherwise sturdy prisoner was known as “Half-Face” and another as “No-Face.”)

Some MDs were hapless mediocrities, as in any sizeable facility anywhere, and some POW doctors put to use in the compounds may not have justified their claims of degrees and expertise. Yet most of the motley American staff made the sprawling POW hospital, despite its crude setting and constant turmoil, one of the world’s great medical facilities, perhaps the best then on the Asian continent.

A separate compound housed about nine hundred often rowdy North Korean women. Many had been handy with guns and captured with weapons, yet all claimed they were only camp followers offering sexual services. Those found pregnant on arrival soon added, for me, the bureaucratic complications of POW infants to our rolls—a unique class of war prisoner. Small children played animatedly in the dirt with pebble-laden Ballantine’s beer cans, furnished by soldiers as the closest thing to a rattle.

Perhaps the most unique prisoner we ever recorded was “#600,001”—the only Japanese seized. “He has been prisoner of the Chinese Communists,” I wrote,

and the Russians, the North Koreans, South Koreans and Americans. He has been a prisoner of war for 8 of the last 10 years. Was forced into the Communist Army from his abode in Manchuria. Captured in the north. His family in Japan knows he is alive from U.S.-sent notification first time in 10 years. Is a sturdy laborer, tends the hot water boilers. Chinese and Korean POWs awed and afraid of him.

Some release from the oppressive death and disorder came for us daily as darkness fell and going beyond the barbed wire became too hazardous. At sundown we left the prisoners to POW doctors, ROK sentries on guard towers and themselves. Any prisoners needing attention after dark had to be brought to compound sally ports. Often at daylight we found corpses at the sally port gates—many were victims of ideological conflict, but others were killed seemingly for their refusal to participate in homosexual acts. We often recognized those who had for some time permitted their bodies to be used, as they were usually young and let their hair grow long; those found as early morning corpses must have changed their minds, and even if we’d known that
it would have been pointless to extricate them. Our recognition of this indicated an end to some varieties of innocence we had brought with us from the New World.

When Christmas 1951 came we were surprised by a visit, in full panoply, by Francis Cardinal Spellman, Roman Catholic vicar to the armed forces. While watchful armed guards stood by, his convoy proceeded to a location marked out for him to receive troops who wished to be blessed and kiss his papal ring. As each soldier came forward, a secretary to the archbishop took down his name and home address. I remained distant, but my pal Bob Benson, with an ambulance company to the north, but no churchgoer, nevertheless dutifully accompanied his men. In February a gracious form letter ostensibly signed by the Cardinal arrived for his family in West Chester, Pennsylvania, affirming that Spellman had met “your dear one,” and that he was “doing well, was in good spirits, and very courageous in facing the problems that confront him and bravely bearing the burdens of a serviceman’s life.” When Christmas came again in 1952, the Cardinal was back, and I watched a replay of the ritual.

Except where alertness was crucial, holidays relaxed discipline. Enlisted men could resort after duty to drinking tension away with cans of Japanese or American beer. Officers could resort to American tipple when available, as it often was. Cases of foreign imports were flown in by friendly airmen as medical supplies—even Piper-Heidsieck champagne—and when all else failed there was medicinal alcohol for concocting rather rough martinis with a dash of canned pineapple juice. My introduction to martinis came that way, and a rare visiting war correspondent, Bob Elegant, somehow helped me struggle afterwards to my sack.

My first New Year’s Eve in Korea found me, as a very junior and low-ranking headquarters guy, on OD duty—as Officer of the Day, which meant the night. After reviewing the first rotation of the perimeter guard, I was to be at the HQ telephone for whatever might come up. Several officers high on drink long before the new year arrived commandeered a jeep and were saluted through the barbed wire to the outer unknown. One, a Navy MD known as Heifetz, which was close to his name, took with him his precious violin, and scratched at it as the jeep rumbled out. When they failed to return and I ordered them re-
trieved—a dawn effort by Sergeant John Hudak and motor pool crew, with a winch attached to their rescue vehicle. Bob, the jeep driver, a future university professor, explained, but not for the record:

It was only for some illegal fraternization in the village, to get our batteries recharged. The trouble was the sake the girls served may have been spiked with anti-freeze siphoned from our jeep’s radiator—or someone else’s. It could have killed us, but we were only overheated and plastered. I remember Heifetz, happy as could be inside the hut, wearing nothing but his violin and his combat boots. When we were staggering out, one of the girls came running out, calling, “Please, sir, you forgot your dog-tags.” We thought we were heading back OK, but suddenly the road disappeared. It’s hard to tell when you’re off a Korean road, especially at night. Heifetz thought he saw a turn coming and yelled, “Hard to starboard!” It got bumpier and bumpier and we couldn’t see anything on either side of us. But we were still feeling pretty happy, even when we realized that we were traveling first in mud and then in shallow water. We had turned into a sometimes-dry stream bed. I realized it as soon as the moon came out from behind a patch of clouds. But the wetter it got, the happier Heifetz was. I guess he was thinking he was still at sea, and when the water started sloshing around our tires, he egged us on.

Soon we ran aground. In higher water the engine stalled and our blue head-lights conked out. The moon was gone again and we could see nothing, not even each other. Sobered up now that our alcohol stashed aboard had given out, we just sat there, nobody saying anything. Then I heard Heifetz’s violin. He was standing up on the back seat and playing away as if he was in Carnegie Hall. It seemed melancholy and he was putting his whole heart and soul into it. When he finally stopped, and we began looking for a flashlight, he got excited. “This is guerrilla country,” he said. “That light could get us into trouble.”

“We are in trouble,” I said. So all four of us got out of the jeep. I led the way forward, single-file, with the flashlight. Heifetz sloshed along in the rear, holding his violin in one hand, his bow in the other. All the protection we had was one carbine, which we kept dry. Walking at bankside, we soon came again to just mud. And then we felt bayonets prodding our backs, and we froze. A friendly patrol of some kind, we hoped. Weren’t we still behind our own lines? But then the jabbering began—and we didn’t recognize Korean talk, or anything else we knew. In the glare of our flashlight we saw faces—all jet black. Really black! They shouted and mumbled, and one who came forward to look at us was black and thin and very tall. “American,” I said to him. “We’re American.” I shined the flashlight on our Eighth Army shoulder patches. Then more lights appeared in the distance and soon we knew we were saved. There were several G.I.s with them, and they spotted that we were officers. One shouted, “Are you hurt, sir?” My teeth were chattering—from the cold—but I said we were just wet. “From the knees down.”

The G.I.s had been taking newly arrived Ethiopian troops on a night training exercise. One explained that the patrol spoke only Amharic. “It’ll be useful to learn a few words of it,” he advised, “if they remain nearby.” In the darkness
he couldn’t see our bedraggled shape, but seeing our officers’ brass he added, “Happy New Year, gentlemen! Can I radio for some help for you?”

I told him to call our code, Ragbag, and ask for the OD.

They got me and I sent a crew. It was daylight when they returned, complete to violin, with Hudak towing their mud-encrusted jeep. I suggested to him that we keep the holiday spirit alive by not reporting the affair. Since he was a sergeant he accepted that. Rank had its privileges.

I asked Heifetz if he recalled anything he had played. “The Prize Song, from Wagner’s Der Meistersinger,” he said, picking up his bow. “Do you want to hear some of it?”

My only telephone call home was arranged soon after, as it meant reserving the opportunity months ahead. My parents’ 25th wedding anniversary was March 20. I had to place the call—nine dollars for three minutes—from the Bell Telephone station in Taegu on the morning of the 21st, which would be evening the day before in Philadelphia. By mail I arranged the time in advance with my brother, Herb, and although most of my pay went directly home to alleviate the wrenching burden of their failing neighborhood grocery, painfully awash amid the burgeoning supermarkets, I sent him additional money to purchase a television set as an anniversary gift. They had never been able to afford one. My call was to be a surprise, but an inadvertent spoiler Bell called to confirm the incoming call while I was jeeping to Taegu. It went through successfully, if briefly, and was my only direct contact with home in all of 1952. Happily, the TV had arrived. I could hear sounds of a party, timed for my call, as I spoke.

I jeeped out again in April. A few captives were not housed with the rest, and could not be kept under prisoner of war conditions. One of my tasks was to place POWs with evidence of leprosy elsewhere, which resulted one day in a sputtering complaint on Ragbag from up

Fig. 11 As First Lieutenant, Medical Service Corps, in Korea, 1952
the chain of command demanding to know how we could identify a number of enemy prisoners as “absent sick.” Weren’t we a POW facility? According to my diary,

I explained … that we’ve sent a handful of POWs diagnosed as having leprosy to a leper colony forty-odd miles away, and that there was little likelihood they’d leave, for they knew they would get an unfriendly reception anywhere else. Nevertheless we are ordered to … establish head count and positive identification by personal check…. We have no idea how many are alive and how many are dead, and who is who.

I take Mr. Chang, my interpreter, and Lt. Gregory, one of the new doctors, while Sgt. Colvin drives [the jeep] and brings along fingerprinting pads. I also bring along somewhat outside regulations—but we might have needed her—an attractive young nurse. We take carbines—in case of trouble. We follow the bumpy substitute for a road northeast above [Compound] Eleven, past the tanks and half-tracks, up hills and down into small villages. Then up steeper hills, until lovely panoramas appear below: terraced rice paddies on the slopes, a patchwork of flat rice paddies beyond, circular, thatch-roofed huts gathered together in village clusters; thin blue rivulets. At the top of the nearly bare, rocky peaks are scattered scrubby little trees, making small green patches on the gray crags. In little clumps here and there are pinkish-violet cherry blossoms. As it is bright day, not even noon, there is no sign of guerrilla presence.

Elevation had erased the sordidness and the prevailing stench until we encountered a fragrant honey cart with barrels of fecal stuff pulled slowly by a donkey, which we were eager to pass, very gingerly. Then, downhill, where villagers stolidly watched us go by, dulled eyes widening in their peculiarly seamed and scarred faces.

“This must be it,” said Gregory. “You know I’ve never seen a leper before!”

Mr. Chang claimed the village was Kyong Sang Nam, not on our map. His identification was hardly needed, for, although most villagers evidenced no serious lesions, I saw among the gathering clump of curious bystanders one without a nose, one without finger tips, and some with flesh in other places eroded by leprosy. The half-dozen POWs in residence—pariahs elsewhere—trotted forward amiably in their G.I. clothes, the best dressed inhabitants in the colony. Such monastery-like isolation remained a medieval holdover from fear of contagion—the repulsion and rejection of the afflicted—yet the bacillus, according to Gregory, was poor at migrating between humans, even those living together, and died after a few hours on a lab slide—his only past contact with the disorder. From my diary again:

The interrogation was over quickly, and fingerprints taken of all available fin-
gers, when someone chattered to Mr. Chang in high-pitched Korean. “He says,” Chang translates, “there is one more POW, and he will go and get him.”

Soon the villager returns, followed by a sturdy, stocky fellow in green G.I. fatigues, with POW daubed in black on the worn knees and on the back of his jacket. Behind come more curious people, all the village apparently now swarming close by to watch us check personal data and acquire a set of fingerprints of Kim Kee Yong. Since Gregory doesn’t know how, I ask Kim in my limited Korean where he is sick, for he appears hearty and happy, and he points to a lesion on his lower lip. Checking his responses, I discover that he is seven days older than I am—we are both twenty-three this month.

On our own we tour the village, the curious dispersing as we go, the children returning to their games in the dust of the narrow dirt road. It is a surprise to discover how self-supporting the colony is. They till their own fields, make their own clothes, and build and furnish their own huts, supplying all their own wants but medicines, which come irregularly from outside. They fish in the Japan Sea, and cut timber in the hills.... And sensible of their common bond, they live cooperatively and at peace with one another, no barriers of ideology interfering with the Communist prisoners’ happy adjustment to life there. For them—the initial horror of their disease soon diluted by its acceptance in the village—it is an earthly paradise, and I cannot imagine their wanting to be repatriated to a North Korean utopia.

From the village it is a short walk to the sea. Less than a quarter-mile away is a rocky promontory looking out over the calm water—a royal blue in the bright sunlight. The deep purple crags rise high above the sea, and in the inlet below we see fishermen with nets and lines, and in their boats a respectable day’s catch—dark, wriggling masses of squid. Thoughts of prisoners and hospitals and war recede—something we fail to realize until we hear the distant honking of the jeep’s horn, reminding us that we must make the trip back in full daylight.

Chuck Colvin, we discover, has been dozing in the driver’s seat and has slumped forward on his horn, waking himself up with a start. We commend his alertness with as much sarcasm as we can, and with no enthusiasm whatever to return, we head back.

A few days later, just before the most violent and fanatical prisoner mutinies began, I was on the road again. The evening of April 9 was the beginning of Passover. The armed services in Korea had made provision for several seders scattered about the country in areas where the concentrations of troops were substantial. As might be expected from a medical facility, however rough, there were more officers than enlisted men eligible—and interested—in attending a seder: six doctors and myself, and five enlisted men. We were given a six-by-six canvas-top truck, and driver, to negotiate the rutted dirt roads. We carried carbines. It was quite a ride, but no guerilla action intervened.
One of the physicians en route to the *seder* had just been reminded of his long-hidden ethnic origins. He had married just before he left for overseas, and had already been away long enough that his wife had just given birth to a boy. In a cablegram with the happy news came word that the baby would be named “Christian.” George was distraught. We knew from his stiff mannerisms and clipped speech that he had German origins, but he had never spoken about it. The cable opened him up. He was born, he said, to a Jewish mother and Lutheran father, both of whom did whatever they could to assimilate into the majority population. Nothing availed when Hitler took power. They had to flee, with their son, first to Cuba and then to the States, where they raised George, he said, as “nothing.” His sole acquaintance with his mother’s heritage was the Jewish cuisine she loved to prepare, which he took to be German. Only when he had to choose a religious initial for his Army dog-tags—in event of death and burial—did George inquire to his mother, who suggested reluctantly that he choose “H” for Hebrew. Since he now felt, in anxious reaction to his son’s name, more Jewish than the mute letter on his dog-tag, we suggested he experience his first *seder*.

The closest *seder* venue for us was a rickety, barnlike structure to the south, near the Pusan railway station, itself a ghastly, sprawling, filthy conglomeration surrounded by ragged beggars, many of them war amputees, and clamoring, pitiful refugees, often clad in crude clothes sewn from stolen khaki G.I. blankets. Our driver remained, armed, with the truck, for otherwise it would have been stolen or quickly disassembled for parts. The building we were directed to may have been a cinema at one time, but was an empty hulk now filled with folding chairs and trestle tables. Our dozen men were among about four hundred attendees, ranging in rank from lieutenant colonel to buck private, and including all the armed services. In the confusion and overcrowding we were seated as we arrived, regardless of rank. An officer fluttered about trying to create some order and quiet, so we could begin. It was already getting dark, and everyone was hungry after long, difficult efforts to get there, some taking all day.

The clamor continued. There weren’t enough chairs and tables. Some of us had to share a place, resting half a rump on a seat. Finally, the dismayed officer managing the event borrowed a chair to stand on,
cupped his hands into a megaphone, and shouted: “Are you sure all of you are Jewish? No ringers here just for the chicken soup?” When he stood on the chair I could see his insignia. He was a Jewish chaplain.

The milling about ceased when Korean workmen arrived with wooden planks which they set up on boxes and crates to make extra tables and benches. Then the chaplain’s assistant dug into a big box and distributed a combination menu and brief *haggadah*. But as we were set to begin, an interruption created a new stir. A newcomer had walked in—and in civilian clothes—and squeezed down at a table where there was still a bit of space. It was a female, the only one there, and the first apparently Jewish girl I had seen in nearly a year. Yet what a disappointment. My notes written soon after describe her as a refugee from Greenwich Village—a place I knew only from hearsay. Considering the circumstances—mud, filth, almost a total lack of exterior sanitation—her appearance was remarkable: high heels and stockings, a fancy dress, tortoise-shell glasses, and long, straight black hair hanging loose around a plain, lipsticked face. Everyone stared as she chain-smoked cigarettes in a long Japanese holder throughout the *seder*. No one stopped her.

I never learned who she was or why she was there. But one of my MD buddies sitting beside me remarked: “Let me see those Japanese girls again. I think I’m going to convert!”

The *seder* service was chanted in a haunting tenor by a corporal who wore a combat infantryman badge. It seemed to us that he was being wasted in his normal Army job—firing a rifle. In a curious turnabout the participant who asked the corporal the traditional Four Questions (back home, always asked by the youngest person at the table) was an officer who vastly outranked him. Everyone lustily sang *Dayenu* and drank, at the very least, through the meal, the four customary cups of wine. There was a lot of wine.

By the time the second cup was blessed and downed, the aroma of familiar *seder* cooking wafted in. Before food was served, the brief ceremonies were completed, so that some troops could begin returning to their stations immediately after the meal. We queued up the usual Army way, with sectioned mess trays in cafeteria style. There were no bowls or spoons, but we each filled our canteen mugs to the brim with steaming chicken soup and *kneidlach*, and heaped our trays with ge-
filte fish, chopped liver, roast chicken and potatoes. Matzos galore appeared, and even kosher pickles.

Later, when we left in near-midnight darkness, there were surplus rations to take back to our locations, if we wished—and who didn’t? Canned gefilte fish, jumbo cans of whole chickens in soup, and matzos. For several days afterward the Jewish servicemen in most units were undoubtedly very popular, as many G.I.s sampled their first Jewish food. All of it had been supplied from the States, with the cans labeled “Packed for the Jewish Welfare Board.” So I learned of at least one organization working in support of the armed services whose funds were well spent.

That was not the case with the Red Cross, the only other service entity I saw in Korea. Its efforts in our behalf (other than assisting with family emergencies back home) consisted of coming by once a week, when conditions were safe, in a truck borrowed from the Army and offering coffee and doughnuts. When we first welcomed them, one of the Red Cross personnel responded: “OK, we’ll be back if you supply us with the coffee, flour and sugar, and we’ll take care of the rest.” Our mess officer blew up and said he could do that himself—if he had coffee, flour and sugar.

It was a warm April night. We didn’t mind the dusty, bumpy ride back as long as it remained quiet, for one of the officers with us had pulled rank on the G.I. clean-up detail and claimed he was a Jewish chaplain. Having eyed an unopened case of “Shapiro’s Extra Heavy Concord Grape Wine” in a corner, Bert explained that he needed it for sacramental purposes. It was far too sweet, but we were in fine spirits en route back.

I returned just in time to see my men examining, under a bare bulb, a very rigid body in the admissions hut. It was a Chinese prisoner who had been hanged after dark in one of the compounds. A kangaroo court—an impromptu trial by a self-appointed judge and jury—had condemned one of their own for political deviation. “People’s Courts” carried out their sentences immediately, often in more sophisticated ways than simple garroting. The POWs who had brought him to guards at the sally port had announced blandly, before vanishing in the shadows: “He committed suicide because you American doctors were only experimenting on him, not making him better.” It turned out that he
wasn’t a patient at all, but a POW orderly in the ward. Clearly it was another murder. Few nights were without them.

When I got back to my hut one of my buddies from the _seder_ trip was holding a bottle of wine in one hand and a jar of something strange in the other. We had missed mail call, and he had received a commercially packaged gift of _taiglach_—an East European holiday treat of sticky, knotted pastries with brown sugar and nuts prepared in a honeyed syrup. “Are we allowed to eat this at _Pesach_?” he asked. It was not unleavened, like matzo. “No,” I said. But we opened the jar and sinned.

In the morning we got a foretaste of coming trouble. Awakened too early, we were greeted by several truckloads of casualties. Bleary eyed, we thought we were seeing the impossible when it turned out that they were not in Red Chinese or North Korean quilted uniforms but in prisoner garb, complete to POW painted on their trouser knees and coats. They hadn’t been wounded on the line before capture, but became casualties on Koje-do, an island southwest of Pusan. An ongoing civil war had been triggered by a command decision to “screen” prisoners. When the shooting stopped from those determined to return, screening had been initiated to separate prisoners refusing repatriation back to communism. Some who refused were not even from the north, but villagers and farmers impressed by the enemy during the invasion across the parallel.

Despite the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, which mandated repatriation, a White House decision based upon grim World War II experience with released Russian prisoners often executed at Stalin’s orders on return, we were not going to send captives to their deaths. We were at a giant hospital (and camp) supposedly insulated from external and internal violence but we knew, every day and night, that the facts were otherwise. We had to screen, too, and we were anticipating our fill of rage.

The presence of so many disaffected enemy prisoners had already led to an intelligence operation attempting to exploit them. It was as goofy as it was ineffectual, yet events would draw me into it. An officer with Military Police insignia came to see me and asked me to walk outside with him in the rainy twilight to avoid being overheard. He called himself Major Hawley, and despite the MP insignia he was admittedly with Intelligence. We stood alone except for several bodies awaiting re-
moval. “I want you to kill off, conveniently,” he began, “some POWs for me. And I’ll want a few others—I’ll identify them to you but you’ll have to find them—to arrange their escape without too much fuss. After that we may have some continuing business for you.” Confidently, Hawley went on to explain that he would handle the disappearance of both the dead and the undead in his fashion. He wanted to retrieve POW informers in the wards before they were exposed and murdered, and spring willing prisoners already identified somehow for covert missions into North Korea and China. I was to make both possible.

“We’ll have to get you Top Secret clearance for this. I’ll get you an interim OK,” he added, “on a general’s signature.”

The spying aspect was more absurd than I realized, but he was persuasive, and he outranked me. My role would be compartmentalized, Hawley said, with me receiving only the information I needed to know, and no more. His people had covert POW lookouts in the compounds, as did the enemy. I was to arrange the disappearance from behind the barbed wire of his POW volunteers. Some would be admitted to the hospital with faked symptoms; some were already there, awaiting a faked discharge. Some would “die.” I would be given identities as needed, and prisoners would be brought to the sally ports on litters, ostensibly for emergency surgery. They would never turn up at the OR. His people would manage that. Some would be shrouded in blankets and seem lifeless. I was to confirm them as dead, and prepare and sign appropriate certification. Others who vanished would have to be described as escapees.

I was to use any subterfuge I could devise to get designated POWs loose. Some would be trained, I was told, as spies, outfitted in enemy uniforms or civilian garb, given radios set to a secret signal, and sent north by submarine and dinghy, or parachuted into hostile territory. If they returned they would be rewarded and freed. The successful Chinese could elect to go to Taiwan.

There was no question about my involvement. It was obviously an order. I complied, offering no hint to anyone. If I hadn’t cooperated, I realized, orders to transfer me and to put someone else in my place would arrive and I would end up somewhere even more unpleasant. Others, in what I learned later from alcoholic confidences was Operation Turncoat, knew further facets of the mission, although at first I did
not. Following instructions, in some cases I went into the compounds in daylight, with an accompanying ROK guard and interpreter, ostensibly to check identities, and, to avoid suspicion, showing interest in others not intended for the operations. The turncoat-to-be had to be there to be quietly informed of the timing set for his extrication and later had to be safely made to disappear.

In my compartmentalized fashion I dispatched POWs to the grave, sent some to surgery, acknowledged escapes, and arranged relocation of discharged prisoners who would never turn up at their transfer camps. On one mission into the wards I found a group of POWs clustered about a prisoner who was reading from what was obviously an illicit publication on cheap newsprint very likely slipped in from a village nearby through the barbed wire. “What are they studying?” I asked through Mr. Chang. “History, geography and communism,” I was told. The turncoat prisoner was among the eager students, very likely to evade any doubt about his loyalty.

On occasion I would fly up in a C-47 as far as Chunchon, just below the 38th parallel, to oversee, at a collection point, the interrogation of prisoners. Some POWs would volunteer anti-communist slogans for our consumption, or would claim to have fought earlier, until captured, for Chiang Kai-shek. Most were untrustworthy. Likely candidates, furnished with faked symptoms, even with X-rays, would be taken to our hospital camp. It was a convenient transit facility, exploited also by the other side. Back at the base, a name, number and sometimes a fingerprint would materialize on a slip I would be handed by Major Hawley, or by someone identified to me as “I’m from Hawley.”

The first leak in the operation known to me was the disappearance from the nurses’ hut of Shirley Gage, the withered lady surgeon. She was somehow drawn into the operation, or arranged on her own to be drawn in, because of her fluent Chinese. She soon seduced a young officer in the mission and managed to slip away with him to the training base for POW parachutists into China, set up on an island above Inchon in the west and close to the 38th parallel. As he was training undead jumpers, Major Gage persuaded him to let her don a parachute and experience the thrill of a fall. I found out about it when word came that she was in Tokyo Army Hospital with a fractured thigh. I knew why. I do not know whether Tokyo did.
Few in Korea or Japan must have known about *Turncoat*, although the operation continued beyond the point of futility. Many prisoners, I assumed, took our bait, whatever the hazards, to get a free ticket home. I heard about some of our alumni on Moscow Radio, which we turned on regularly for its spin. A political officer for the Chinese commander, Peng Dehuai, described the alleged seizure of ten alleged “fully armed spies” who had killed a guard. As captors and captives “rested by the highway, the parachuted spies took the weapons of the People’s Army, and killed the officer, wounding the two soldiers.” When they reached Pyongyang the spies were recaptured and reportedly executed. The episode was denied by Washington as enemy propaganda.

I kept my silence, and continued accepting Hawley’s instructions, which became less urgent as other issues intervened during my further months in Korea. Soon he, too, vanished from view, but there were always more Hawleys. Merrill Newman, one operative then unknown to me, in his middle eighties, late in 2013, naively made a tourist trip to North Korea hoping to visit Mount Kuwol, south of Pyongyang. “White Tiger” former POWs he had trained in “Donkey 6” and sent off from the island of Cho-do had reached Kuwol, above the Taedong River off the Yellow Sea. In the south the surviving returnees had been portrayed as heroes and a picture book series about them appeared in 1971. In the 1990s a South Korean television network aired a documentary about the “White Tigers” and the munitions dumps they allegedly blew up, the supply lines they intercepted, and the spies they infiltrated into the North Korean army. Newman only became known to North Korean intelligence from foolish statements to a hotel guide in Pyongyang. On videotape on his arrest, Newman confessed to wartime misdeeds, corroborated in Seoul by Kim Chang-sun, then eighty-one and one of Newman’s returned intruders. After a month in a North Korean prison Newman was permitted to return home, where he denied everything.

Sending not-so-secret agents would persist on both sides into the postwar decades, using increasingly technical sophistication, but also with continuing stupidity. The U.S. Army in 1990 declassified heavily redacted documents about its role, apparently long inactive. Some details when exposed are then beyond earlier denial. Such covert operations worked both ways. In addition to submarine transport of spies
and provocateurs, the North Koreans have constructed tunnels under the demilitarized zone, once sending a squad in faked uniforms to assassinate the South Korean president. The mission failed, but destabilizing schemes continue. The war has never ended.

Endnotes

1. Guthrie wrote “Yuh” rather than “You,” but few listeners knew that. I didn’t.

2. Korean place names have been altered in spelling by the government since—as Busan for Pusan. I have left them as they were in 1951.

3. The mission creep catchphrase, however appropriate, dates back in the press only to Vietnam, and refers to the expansion of military involvements from more limited initial goals.

4. “Digger” O’Dell was an enormously popular character, and an undertaker, on the 1940s radio situation comedy show and 1950s era television series Life of Riley.

5. It could not have been anti-freeze, which would have left them dead.